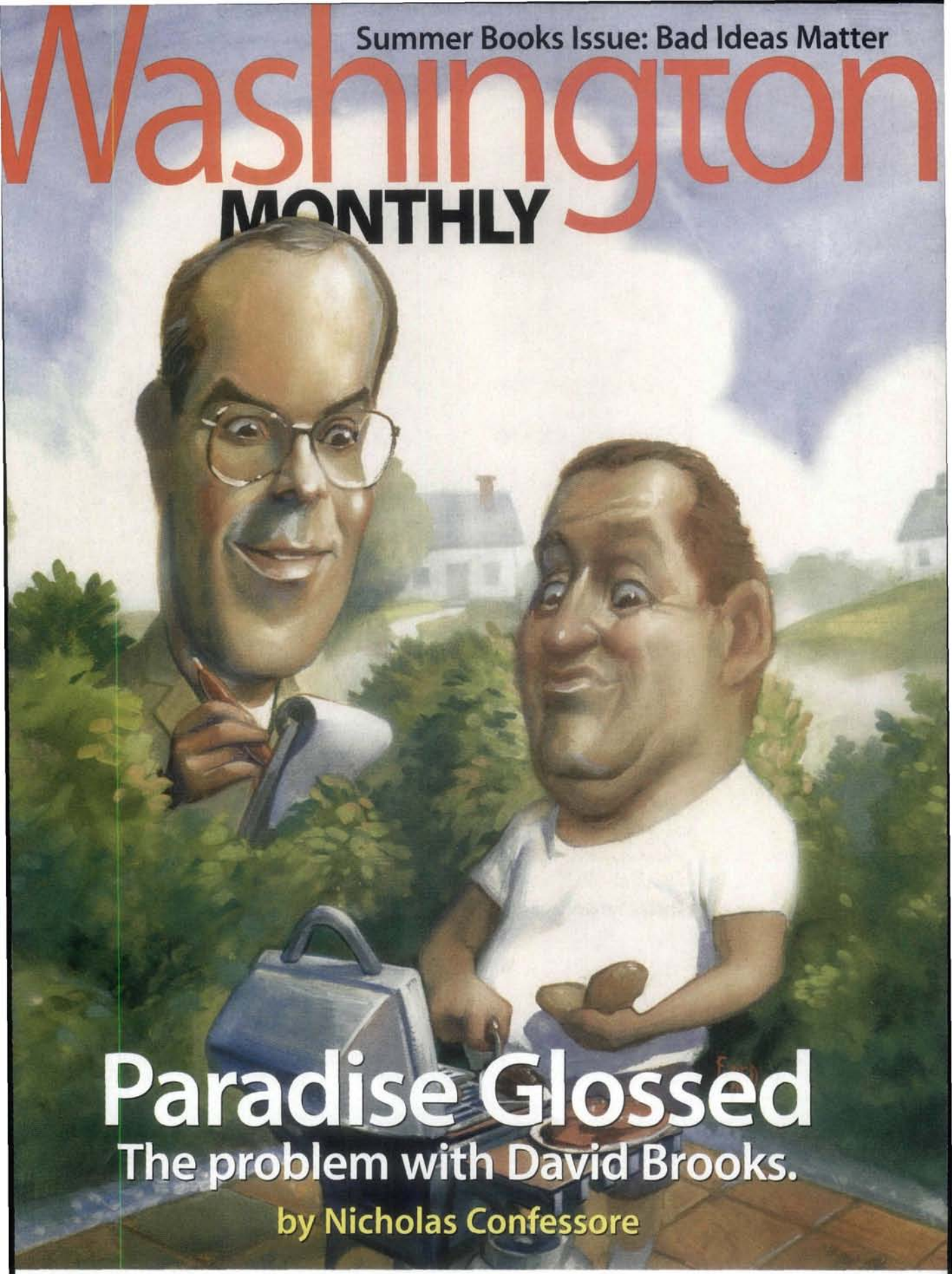
Summer Books Issue: Bad Ideas Matter

Washington MONTHLY



Paradise Glossed

The problem with David Brooks.

by Nicholas Confessore

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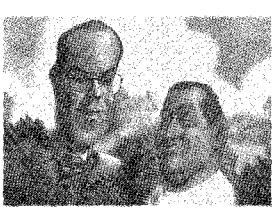

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Letters

What goes up...

Thank you for Benjamin Wallace-Wells' article ("There Goes the Neighborhood," April), concerning the likelihood of an impending real-estate plunge. My wife and I saw this type of run-up firsthand in the stock market and real-estate market while living in Seattle in the late 1990s, and all you heard, from the workplace to every restaurant, were cries of, "Get in while you still can, because it's only going up!"

We now live in Sacramento, where the housing prices have tripled over the past four years. We are trying to buy a townhouse—not easily done here, even with a household income that exceeds $100,000 per year. People continue to pay astronomical prices for homes that they would have scoffed at several years ago for being too small, too dated, or just plain ugly.

Everyone is pushing us to consider interest-only loans and ARM's, just as they have used in order to get the biggest house they can. We would not entertain either option ... not in this climate. We are expecting a huge drop in housing prices, though very few people seem to agree. "There's just too much demand," they keep saying; I respond, "Don't you mean too much enticement?" People are living in the ether, and economic realities will eventually straighten this situation out, and we expect it will be soon. And painful.

Howard & Gina Parr
Sacramento, Calif.

I live with my husband and our seven children in the greater Seattle area. Although we are thankful that we own our small home, we have long been priced out of the real estate market for a move to a larger home. We have been puzzled as to why the home prices in this region have continued to soar, despite a sluggish economy. Even remote areas that are depressed due to plant closings and other mishaps have continued to enjoy phenomenal real-estate appreciation. Your insightful article made some sense of the situation. Thanks for an interesting read.

Cyndy Jacobsen
Puyallup, Wash.

It took 14 years for the average price of houses in my neighborhood to equal the previous high of 1989, without factoring inflation and the buying power of the dollar. I just closed my third new mortgage in less than five years. Now, I have a 15-year, fixed-rate at 4.875 percent, which reduces my payments from the previous that was at 6.75 percent, which replaced a 30-year at 7.98 percent. While I have not bought luxury items, I have renovated and improved the house with a new heating/air conditioning system, paved stone driveway and patio, and double-paned reflective-glass windows. So, obviously I have helped fuel the local economy. However, I don't foresee much chance of another refinancing in the future and I certainly have no reason to risk assuming an ARM in order to save 1.5 percent for a year or two. Kudos for such an insightful article.

Gina Osborne
Via email

April 2004

People now pay astronomical prices for homes that they would have scoffed at years ago for being too small, too dated, or just plain ugly. They're living in the ether, and economic realities will eventually straighten this situation out, and we expect it will be soon. And painful.
—Howard & Gina Parr

Shill considered

I could not agree more with Shannon Brownlee's excellent article "Doctors Without Borders" (April) on why we should not trust medical journals. Although I once required my students to restrict their research to the journals as the only authoritative source, I now tell them to read journals with caution.

I have been researching drug-company-sponsored articles for four years. It is sad that patients cannot trust the very people who are supposed to be caring for them and that supposedly objective scientific studies cannot be relied upon to give accurate information about pharmaceutical products.

Barry Turner
Department of Biological Sciences
University of Lincoln
London, England

"Doctors Without Borders" is a great piece of journalism on a disturbing topic. As an anthropologist who lectures on ethical research in most of my courses, I have never before discussed ethics in the context of publication of research. I will now. You have given me some nourishing lecture fodder.

Raymond Hames
Professor of Anthropology
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Neb.

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Shannon Brownlee's article about conflict of interest in the pharmaceutical industry and medical science is dead on. My child has regressive autism and once we started looking into the possible causes (i.e. vaccines, mercury, etc) and began to really scrutinize the research, we learned to distrust any data that comes from drug companies. Hopefully the recent cover-up of antidepressant studies will force the CDC and FDA to rethink their evaluation of new drugs. Unfortunately, because of the skeptic that I have become, I doubt it. They do have their own jobs to protect.

Cynthia Zahoruk
Via email

I enjoyed very much Shannon Brownlee's article and agree that those who write editorials should not accept industry money, and that full disclosure is very important. I do take issue with three things she wrote. First, regarding her comparison of expensive calcium-channel blockers for hypertension with "over-the-counter" diuretics: The diuretics are inexpensive and very effective, but do require a prescription. Second, her assertion that a cholesterol-lowering drug may simply cause muscles and kidneys to break down rather than benefit a patient is misleading and factually incorrect. Statin drugs risk liver failure, not kidney failure. Moreover, there is no doubt that among certain groups of people—those at very high risk for heart disease and those with known heart disease—statin drugs save lives by reducing the incidence of heart attack and stroke. This has been well shown in independent studies. To suggest that physicians may be represcribing a statin only because they have been influenced by a drug company runs the risk of encouraging people to avoid a potentially life-saving therapy. Last, Brownlee's assertion that medical residents get used to accepting drug-company blandishments because they are not paid a living wage is simply wrong. As the director of a residency training program, I know that, by and large, residents are paid between $40,000 and $50,000 a year in most of the Northeast states. This may be a small amount compared to future earnings, but it is certainly enough to support an individual and allow them to buy beer and pizza on occasion. Student loans, which are a very heavy burden, are deferrable for at least part of residency and are tax-deductible. Given what truly impoverished people must endure, to suggest that residents in training are paid less than a living wage is preposterous. It is, rather, incumbent upon the profession to rid the "free lunch" concept from our culture.

William Wertheim, M.D.
Via email

Shannon Brownlee replies: Thanks to Dr. Wertheim for his kind words, and my apologies for misstating that diuretics are over-the-counter medications. Dr. Wertheim is also correct in pointing out that the statins, or cholesterol lowering drugs, can reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke in patients with serious heart disease. But doctors are prescribing statins to millions of patients whose only symptom is elevated cholesterol, which turns out to be a poor predictor of heart disease. One of the potential—though rare—side-effects of taking a statin drug is a condition known as rhabdomyolysis, a break-down of the muscles that can lead to renal failure, but I should have made it clearer in the piece that rhabdomyolysis does not strike every patient on statins. Finally, apparently my attempt at writing tongue-in-cheek about medical residents' salaries fell flat. The issue is not whether they can afford to buy beer and pizza, of course, but rather their willingness to accept gifts that all evidence sug-

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gests will shape their judgment when they take out the prescription pad.

Linkin' continentals

As a British citizen, I was trying to decide whether I was going to vote "yes" to the new E.U. Constitution, but after reading Nicholas Kulish's article "Euro Brash" (April), I'm now completely swayed in its favor.

What better way to finally stand up to the Bush administration. Also it seems an excellent way to make America more rational and less militaristic in other international situations.

I will direct as many people as I can to this article—most Brits are fairly rational creatures and it will surely convince them to vote in Europe's favor. I'm sure if Blair used this article instead of regular campaigning, he would most definitely convince the British public to vote yes to the E.U. Constitution.

Unending thanks for your article, you have done a great thing.

Matthew Vincent
Via email

Vowing out

Sounds like Jonathan Rauch ("Dire Straights," April) misses a key point on cohabitation. Judy and I suffered gut-wrenching, budget-busting divorces before we met. Then, 19 years ago when we (finally!) met, we spontaneously decided that marriage was a bad deal.

We call each other Lifemates. Our relatives and friends will tell you that we are as devoted and caring—as "married"—as any couple they know. The legal stuff? We are both legally certified as Guardians for each other and with Powers of Attorney, for emergencies. Passing up the expense of a will, we recently, at little cost at the county courthouse, put both our names as JTWROS (joint tenants, rights of survivorship) on our property, our home, and our vehicle.

We've got each other covered as we age, the way we want, with no heavy-duty legal strapping. Which brings me to our point: Love is magic, not legal. It is indescribably and deeply personal. We do not want the intrusion of a legal (or societal) anchor into our beautiful relationship. That hasn't worked for us. This has.

Barry G. Parsons and Judy Holder
Madison, Fla.

Jonathan Rauch's article made a persuasive argument that state-sanctioned marriage should encompass all couples seeking a license. I wish he had gone further.

The constitutional and legal arguments that support his thesis also support the proposition that those who purport to act as agents of the state in performing marriages should be required to recognize the equal right of all licensed couples to their services. If religious organizations wish to differentiate among validly licensed couples, they should refrain from acting as state agents by executing marriage certificates based on such licenses at their ceremonies. Otherwise, their refusal to marry certain licensed couples while agreeing to marry others may further ensnare them in the legal/political thicket.

John A. Rudy
Cooperstown, N.Y.

Piqued Greek

I am writing in regards to "Twisted Sisters" (by Margaret Sullivan, April) a review of Alexandra Robbins's new book *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities.* I am the current vice president of scholarship of a national sorority, and our chapter is in Massachusetts. I speak on behalf of my entire chapter when I state that I am extremely disheartened and exasperated by your portrayal of this irresponsible book. One reason readers choose your publication is the assumption that such a well-respected news organization would practice responsible journalism.

Robbins chooses to "unveil" the "secret" lives of sororities. In fact, none of sorority life is specifically kept secret save for our national rituals, most conceived of in the 19th century. Hazing is considered a most destructive and irresponsible practice which the National Panhellenic Conference *does not* support and has never supported. In addition, any dangerous behavior that was in fact witnessed should be reported to local and campus authorities, rather than simply splashed irresponsibly across a newspaper or in a "tell-all" book for profits.

The 26 national sororities in the United States are wonderful places for a young woman to grow and learn during and beyond their college years. It is irresponsible to slander past, current, and future members of Greek life with stories of rampant sexual assault, drug use, discrimination, and hazing. Past members of sororities include lawyers, astronauts, women's rights advocates, and senators.

Marianne Metzger
Via email

Correction:

In last month's Who's Who column, we related that conservative activist Grover Norquist had lobbied the White House to include three controversial American Muslim clerics in the audience for a speech about Islam that President George W. Bush delivered shortly after 9/11. In fact, Norquist was not connected in any way with the clerics' appearance at Bush's speech.

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Tilting at **Windmills**

by **Charles Peters**, founding editor

Reagan redux

John Kerry is, as everyone knows by now, not gifted in the art of concise formulation. Too many of his thoughts find expression in complicated and meandering sentences and paragraphs that often leave the listener uncertain of his exact meaning. *Slate* even has a feature called "Kerryisms" that tries to divine Kerry's true verbal intent. Mindful of the senator's need for help, I've been asking friends for suggestions about how Kerry could present issues more vividly. Many of their answers reveal that there are more convoluted Kerrys out there than I had realized. But one response struck me as just the kind of thing that the senator needs to say: "Do you feel safer today than you did four years ago?"

Smoking gun

"The alert came at 10:17 a.m. on a sultry summer morning on the Mississippi. A crop duster circled four times over the river near Natchez, Miss., sending clouds of dark powder down on the tugboat and barges below." Thus began an article in the *Post* about a day at the Homeland Security operation in Washington. "It was another day, another false alarm," reported Sari Horwitz. "The crews on the boats were monitored for symptoms of poisoning, but none developed. Meanwhile, a deputy sheriff tracked down the pilot. It turned out he had been drinking and doing drugs and was flying out of control. 'We arrested him,' the center's director, [retired Marine Brig. Gen. Matthew E.] Broderick, said simply. 'The guy was just a drunk.'"

There the general, the story's authors and *The Washington Post*'s editors left the matter. Weren't they the tiniest bit alarmed that a pilot in that shape had been permitted to fly a crop duster? The fact is that at many of the thousands of American airports and airstrips serving private pilots, a drunk—or a terrorist—can take off without having been checked out or intercepted by any authority. This is one of the biggest holes in our homeland security net, and did seem to me worth at least a passing mention.

Gay old time

To most of us, Bush's ignorance is scandalous. Even his chief of staff, Andrew Card, admits "he does not dwell on the newspapers, but he reads the sports page every day." But just to show that a sympathetic journalist can find a way to put a favorable gloss on an unfortunate trait, here's how Bill Sammon of the conservative *Washington Times* puts it in his new book *Misunderestimated*: "The President is not steeped in the minutiae of individual news articles."

By the way, the first chapter of Sammon's book tells about a night the Bush entourage spent at a Portland hotel with 2,500 players from a gay softball league. In reality, nothing scandalous seems to have happened, but aren't the possibilities fascinating?

The Tegucigalpa threat

If private pilots can avoid security completely, airlines serving small airports come pretty close to attaining the same result. "Many of these airports have no metal detection, no security screening, and no inspection of luggage for explosives," writes *The Washington Post*'s Sara Kehaulani Goo. Yet small airports can serve thousands of people. The North Las Vegas airport had 64,000 passengers last year. And their planes fly into large cities like Dallas with targets like the Cowboys' Texas Stadium that are very tempting to terrorists.

The small airport problem here is another version of one that has long worried me: the Third World airports that, despite lax security procedures, send planes to large cities in the United States today. Passengers from London and Paris may be carefully scrutinized—in fact steps have recently been taken to make sure they are—but just imagine what the security is like in San Salvador, Guatemala City, or Tegucigalpa?

Full sovereignty?

My proposal last October that we should cut and run from Iraq on a fixed date was greeted with such underwhelming response as to put it on life support. Now, I am happy to say that I have been joined by Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The New Republic*, and as noted by *The Washington Post*'s Peter Slevin, the former diplomat Morton Abramowitz, and former deputy national security advisor James Steinberg. The reason for the fixed date is that it would tend to eliminate from the ranks of those opposing our forces in Iraq the people who just want us to leave as distinguished from the terrorists who want to torment us. Patrick Graham's article in the June *Harper's* shows that there are many Iraqis who are not terrorists or professional America haters but simply don't want us to occupy their country.

The right sources

I agree with those who have been praising Bob Woodward's new book *Plan of Attack*. It is a good—a very good—book, full of fascinating inside dope about the Bush administration and its obsession with Iraq. I worry, however, about the lesson that other journalists will draw from it.

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It is based, as have been most of Woodward's books after *All the President's Men*, on interviews with the big shots. Because of the reputation Woodward has earned over 30 years, these people are now afraid not to talk to him. And because they know other big shots will be talking to him, they are afraid to conceal anything that one of the others might have revealed. An unknown young reporter can't start this way. The big shots will seldom talk to him, and even when they do, they're going to think they can get away with pulling the wool over his eyes. That's why Woodward's—and Bernstein's—*All the President's Men* was a much better model for young journalists, and indeed for most reporters. Its message is to talk to sources at all levels, from the personal secretary to the cabinet secretary if he'll see you. Indeed, this is really all that most young reporters can do. But as they become more successful, and the big shots become glad to see and seduce them, they can get on the wrong track. They should remember that they're most likely to get the story from the people who are working at the action point. The reporter who went out for a drink with a few Abu Ghraib prison guards last fall would now be framing his Pulitzer.

The cocktail party

Robert Gates, the former CIA director, and Dewey Claridge, one of the agency's most famous case officers, both acknowledged to Frederick P. Hitz, the author of a new book, *The Great Game*, "that they knew of no significant recruitment of Soviet spies during their long careers. The spies were all walk-ins or volunteers." This is the most devastating of all the disturbing facts I've learned about the CIA. If they never succeeded in recruiting a Soviet spy, what did they do all day? And what was the justification for all those case officers going to all those embassy cocktail parties over the 40 years of the Cold War?

Passengers from London and Paris may be carefully scrutinized—in fact steps have recently been taken to make sure they are—but just imagine what the security is like in San Salvador, Guatemala City, or Tegucigalpa?

Fortress Wyoming

That things are not exactly going swimmingly in the new Department of Homeland Security is the import of two recent items. "As of April 2004, about 85% of the preparedness grants distributed from the 2003 budget had not been utilized," Christopher Cox, the chairman of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, told reporter John McCaslin of *The Washington Times*. Some of the money that has been spent has gone for ridiculous purposes—like buying a small Maryland fire department a $350,000 custom-made fireboat or purchasing a new office security system for prosecutors in Prince George's County, Md.—that we pointed out in "Tilting" in January. The committee also found that the money is not being distributed with due regard to the relative risk faced by the recipient states and communities, and that the federal guidelines on how the money is to be spent are inadequate.

"The formula for distributing homeland security money gives a disproportionate amount to less populated places," reports *Time*'s Amanda Ripley. New York has received $24.77 per person while Wyoming got $61.27, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. At least we have the comfort of knowing that Dick Cheney can feel safe when he goes home.

The news is no better at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which was incorporated into the Homeland Security empire. The *Post*'s Al Kamen has come up with a survey of FEMA employees. Asked if FEMA is better since the merger, one respondent said yes, 16 said there had been no change, and 67 said "poorer." Asked if they would move to another agency if they could, 18 said they would stay put, 14 weren't sure, and 51 said yes. This is the same agency that under Clinton appointee James Lee Witt was one of the government's success stories in the 90s. What about the Bush administration leadership? Two recipients said "excellent," eight said "good," 28 said "fair," and 33 said "poor."

What liberal media?

"Kerry Vies for Screen Time: Networks Focus on Iraq, Bush; Democrats Sometimes Ignored" read the headline above an article by Dan Balz and Howard Kurtz in the May 19 *Post*. Most of the story was about how Bush was getting the lion's share of television coverage. But it also noted that newspapers do run Kerry stories "though usually on inside pages." The *Post*'s editors proceeded to prove the point by placing this story on page 5, and the other Kerry story of the day on page 4.

Shark repellent

One of my disputes with Ralph Nader over the years has concerned his tendency to depict trial lawyers as white knights in shining armor, dedicated to protecting the little guy from corporate abuse. Some of them are knights, but others are more dedicated to lining their pockets with the fat fees that they pick from the little guy's pocket. The class action is a

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much favored technique for doing the picking. And to realize the maximum take from a class action, it is necessary to be named the "lead counsel" by the court.

Because "the lead firm collects the bulk of the fees and controls how the money is doled out to other lawyers," writes Kara Scammel in *The Wall Street Journal*, these knights in shining armor spend much of their time "elbowing each other." This tug of war, Scammel explains, "is all about money." And, I would add, not about justice.

The result is that the unhappy losers of the tug of war have created a new species of lawyer. Now, in addition to the traditional specialists in real property, trusts and estates, torts and criminal law, we have the "objector." Objectors specialize in protesting the fees given to the lead attorneys, and in seeking a bigger piece of the pie for the other lawyers in the case. The *Journal*'s Jathon Sapsford tells the story of "poor" Lloyd Constantine, who a year ago thought he was going to get a class-action fee of $600 million. But he still hasn't collected. Objectors challenging his fee have the settlement tied up on appeal. I must say that it does not break my heart that the sharks are attacking one another. At least they're not stirring up trouble for the rest of us.

Not so swift

Speaking of the *Post* editors and Kerry, another example of their failure to treat him fairly was provided by a May 5 article headed "Veterans group criticizes Kerry war record." It described how a group of "swift-boat veterans" raised questions about Kerry's service record, quoting one as saying, in regard to the actions for which Kerry received his medals, "I have serious questions based on talking to people who were involved in the incident." Although the article went on for 13 paragraphs, running across six columns at the top of the page, there is not an exculpatory fact in it about Kerry's military record. It seemed to me that here was a place to at least mention briefly the findings of the *Post*'s own April 23 review of Kerry's service in Vietnam in which eight of his nine crewmates were said to have found him "daring and unflinching in combat."

Nico-teen

Did you know that the cigarette companies are making cigarettes with candy, fruit, and other sweet flavors? This is obviously designed to lure kids into smoking—according to the *Boston Globe*'s Stephen Smith, they are being marketed under teeny-bopper brand names like Mandarin Mint and Cherry Cheesecake—and is especially hideous because the earlier smoking begins, the more likely lung cancer will be the result. The guilty parties, by the way, are not fly-by-night companies but big-timers like R.J. Reynolds and Brown & Williamson. At least one state, Massachusetts, is trying to halt this insanity. Christine Ferguson, the commissioner of the Department of Public Health, is the hero. Other state officials around the country should emulate her. And isn't it about time for the federal Food and Drug Administration to take on the tobacco companies?

Picking on Pickering

I applaud the recent media efforts by Mike Wallace and Nat Hentoff among others to tell Judge Charles Pickering's side of the story. He, you will remember, is the federal judge whose appointment to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals by George W. Bush was filibustered by the Democrats, so that he serves only by virtue of a recess appointment that runs out next year. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) accused Pickering of "glaring racial insensitivity." The facts are that Pickering had sent his children to an integrated school while many white Mississippians were doing otherwise, had successfully defended a young black man accused of robbing a white girl at knifepoint, had testified against the killer of civil rights worker Vernon Dahmer and had been rewarded with the Ku Klux Klan's successful opposition to his effort to gain reelection to the state Senate. Deborah Gambrell, who has represented the NAACP in a case before Pickering, says she is "shocked and appalled" at the attack on him by Senate Democrats.

I hope this is not another

WOLFOWITZ'S ARITHMETIC

Paul Wolfowitz had struck me as a policy disaster but otherwise a nice guy. Not now. When a Congressman recently asked him how many Americans had died in Iraq, he answered, "approximately 500." The actual figure then was more than 700, and is now more than 800. This man does not even have the conscience to care about the harm he has done. Why else would he not have accurate casualty figures engraved in his heart and mind every day?

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example of what the Democrats did to Clement Haynsworth when Richard Nixon nominated him for the Supreme Court in 1969. Haynsworth had earned a reputation as a sound, if conservative, judge. The main evidence against him was that he had failed to recuse himself from a few cases against large companies in which he held stock that was far from a major stake. There was no evidence that his holdings had influenced his judgment. Yet the Democrats, fresh from losing the White House to a man they heartily and justifiably detested, were itching to give Nixon a bloody nose. They crusaded against Haynsworth as if he were evil incarnate, and defeated his nomination by a vote of 55-45. Nixon then thumbed his nose at the Democrats by nominating the absurdly unqualified G. Harrold Carswell, and additional months of senatorial efforts then had to be devoted to defeating him. After Carswell was defeated, Nebraska senator Roman Hruska rose to say: "Even if he is mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they. . . ?" He was serious—for good reason. His own ability, to put it as gently as possible, was a constant source of justifiable modesty.

Homeland insecurity

Back to homeland security: "State and local governments aren't being let in on the national homeland security strategy," writes Donald F. Kettl in *Governing* magazine. "That may be because there isn't one."

Our man in Fallujah

The American occupation forces in Iraq have not been conspicuously successful in picking Iraqi generals to solve our problems in Fallujah. The first one had to be replaced in less than 24 hours. The second, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Latif, whom we have entrusted with responsibility for disarming the rebels, could not have delighted occupation authorities when he told *Reuters* news service:

"Weapons are not the problem. They are easy to collect. What we need to do is rebuild our country. There is no need for American soldiers. I'm sure the Americans would be glad to go to their homes."

If our own hand-picked Iraqis don't want us, who does?

Safe seats

In 1992, 19 House members lost elections. Ten years later, in 2002, the figure had dropped to eight, and four of those lost to other incumbents in elections brought about by redistricting. Redistricting by state legislatures to create safe districts for one party or another is a major cause of the excessive incumbent survival rate. Texas, where the Republicans seem to have succeeded in depriving the Democrats of six seats, is the most recent example. *The Chicago Tribune*'s Steve Chapman has an answer to this problem: have redistricting done by independent commissions. I'm ordinarily wary of legislatures delegating their authority to unelected bodies, but this may warrant an exception. Chapman points out that in Iowa, where such a body does the redistricting, three of the five House seats were competitive in 2002. This stands in contrast to the national average of one competitive seat in 10 in 2002. It occurs to me that this may be like closing military bases, something that a legislative body can't do right and that is better left to an independent commission.

Another cover up

Remember James J. Smith, the FBI agent who carried on a 20-year affair with a woman suspected of being a Chinese double agent? At Smith's behest, the FBI paid her $1.7 million to provide us with intelligence while she was using her trysts with him to lift confidential documents from his briefcase and copy them.

In May, he was allowed to plead guilty to a simple charge of having concealed the affair. This will enable him to avoid prison time and keep his pension. Why is he being treated so gently? The speculation is that the FBI wants to protect higher-ups who authorized the payment even though they knew about the affair. A "former senior law enforcement official" tells Eric Lichtblau of *The New York Times*:

"This is a way of silencing J.J., because if you put him on trial he will allege that everyone up the chain of command knew what he was doing."

The *Times* does not mention another FBI agent who played around with the same woman. Doesn't it seem possible that his story is something else the FBI does not want to see further explored?

Bonus everyone?

I seem to be picking on the *Post* this month—and I apologize to my friends there—but here's another complaint about a recent story. The article's headline did accurately capture its essential message: "Two-thirds of Federal Workers Get a Bonus." And the article went on to quote Paul Light, a professor of government at NYU, as making a point that needed to be made: "I don't think Americans think that 60% of federal employees would be so well above average that they would earn a bonus." But the authors of the article and their editors seem unaware of the main contributing factor to the bonus scandal, which is something called the "step" or "merit" raise that is given to civil servants and is received by, not two-thirds, but 99 percent of those eligible each year. By the way, the step or merit

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increase is not just a one-year bonus, but a permanent raise.

Kari's narrow escape

Good news from the Portland *Oregonian*: Remember Kari Rein, the legal immigrant from Norway and longtime resident of Oregon, who was threatened with deportation because she and her husband had been convicted 11 years ago for having six marijuana plants in their home? She has been pardoned by Oregon's governor, Ted Kulongoski. This means her "crime" has been removed from her record, and that she will not be deported. If you want to know who was responsible for even proposing the deportation, look no further than "Tilting"'s government agency of the month, the Department of Homeland Security.

Mail order pay raise

You may have seen the recent stories about civil servants who got their jobs or promotions through bogus degrees that they bought from institutions where the parchment is granted by mail-order. What you may not know is why government employees would go so far to obtain a degree. The reason is that eligibility for most of the better federal jobs is determined, not on the basis of the written tests the public imagines, but on the basis of a paper record. Degrees make a big difference. But personnel evaluators seldom look behind the paper to see if the degree is real and truly reflects the applicant's ability to do a better job.

Even where written tests are given, the civil service does not always work as the public imagines. In Boston, for example, where most police and fire department jobs are supposed to be awarded by merit testing, only six of 200 top scorers were among the 51 recently deemed eligible to fill the available jobs.

If the CIA never succeeded in recruiting a Soviet spy, what was the justification for all those case officers going to all those embassy cocktail parties over the 40 years of the Cold War?

Eleven of the 51 had been outscored by 2,000 points or more by other applicants. What's at work are "preferences." The most well-known of these are preferences for minority applicants. But in Boston, there are 12 other preferences, according to *Common Wealth* magazine, which may turn out to be *The Washington Monthly* of Massachusetts. First among them goes to resident children of police firefighters killed in the line of duty. Then come non-resident children of the same, resident disabled veterans, resident children of police or firefighters injured in the line of duty, non-resident children of the same, resident veterans, resident widows of veterans killed in action or by service-connected disability, and resident non-veterans. Each of these references by itself is understandable. But taken together, they spell the end of hiring on the basis of merit.

Twenty-six words

The *Post*'s lack of enthusiasm for stories that are favorable to Kerry was once more displayed on May 28. After it devoted two front-page stories to Bush's foreign affairs speech that same week, its report on Kerry's first major foreign affairs address ran on page A9. *The New York Times* put it on page one, as indeed did even the Bush-loving *Washington Times*. The *Post* can take comfort, however—ABC "World News Tonight" was even worse. It used only 26 words from Kerry's speech, apparently because they dealt with Iraq. The rest of ABC's account concerned discontent about Kerry's position on Iraq. Actually, if the ABC reporter, Dan Harris, and his producer had paid closer attention to the speech—which struck me as one of Kerry's best—they would have known that much of it had clear implications for Iraq policy. And even the bit they used failed to make Kerry's point about why the administration's Iraq policy had failed.

"They looked to force before exhausting diplomacy. They bullied when they should have persuaded. They have gone it alone when they should have assembled a team. They have hoped for the best when they should have prepared for the worst. They have made America less safe."

Fair share

John McCain recently called for more sharing of the sacrifice during wartime. Dennis Hastert replied: "John McCain ought to visit our young men and women at Walter Reed and Bethesda. There is the sacrifice in this country."

Can you believe it? This man, as speaker of the House, is third in the line of succession for the presidency. His comment makes clear that he is cut from the same cloth as Bush and Cheney, and would be no improvement. All three have pursued a policy of tax cuts for the wealthy, who are the very people who do not serve in the military.

The rich should bear more, not less of the financial burden. During World War II, the top tax rate was 90 percent. The Republicans have cut it to 35 percent, as they send to their deaths young Americans whose parents do not live on Park Avenue or in Palm Beach.

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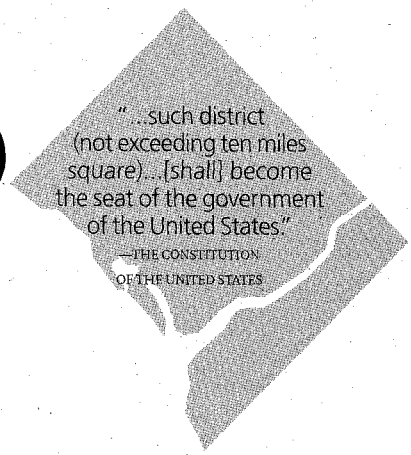
10 MILES SQUARE



It Came From the Potomac

Even snakeheads have a lobbyist.

By Eric Pfeiffer

In *Snakehead Terror*, a low-budget horror movie broadcast earlier this year on the Sci Fi Channel, the residents of a small Maryland fishing town found themselves plagued by a species of fish accidentally transplanted from China: *Channa micropeltes*, otherwise known as the snakehead. In the fictional infestation's early stages, the green-skinned fish were merely a nuisance, and local authorities poisoned the town's lake in hopes of eradicating the pesky saw-toothed beast. But the poison did its trick a little too well and killed off most of the lake's other inhabitants along with—or so it seems—the snakeheads. Two years later, a desperate entrepreneur dosed the water with human growth hormone, aiming to revive the local fishing economy. Any 6-year-old with a television set can guess what happened next: It turned out that not all the snakeheads were eradicated, and the survivors returned with appetites matching their newfound dimensions.

Unlike most of what's shown on the Sci Fi Channel, the plot of *Snakehead Terror* edges uncomfortably close to reality. Two summers ago, the snakehead—a hardy, aggressive species that dates back to the Paleozoic era and can survive for a time outside of water—began to turn up in ponds in Wisconsin and Maryland, devouring plants, other fish, and even small mammals. A few pet owners had acquired the snakeheads as exotic pets and then, apparently had second thoughts. *The Washington Post* interviewed one such man, Louis Galeano: "Galeano bought four snakeheads from a pet shop in Waldorf [Va.]," the *Post* reported, "kept them in a 35-gallon tank, and fed them 20 plump goldfish twice a week. They grew like Godzilla, he said, and mealtime became a slaughter. He wouldn't put his hand near the water... 'They scare me,' he said. 'They just kill and eat and eat and kill.'" After three months, he took the snakeheads to the pet store. Other snakehead owners were less scrupulous and apparently just dumped them into the nearest body of water. Worried about an infestation, local environmental agencies dispatched task forces to places where the fish had turned up. They drained some ponds, poisoned others, and in some cases used electric shocks to stun the fish and bring them up to the surface.

But, as in the movie version, not all the snakeheads were killed. Last month, an angler fishing for bass in a tributary of the Potomac River, just a few miles

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south of the monuments on D.C.'s waterfront, caught a 10-pound snakehead that thrashed so hard he thought he was fighting a 25-pound fish. Several more specimens have since been discovered in other nooks and inlets of the sprawling, brackish river. This infestation has authorities concerned. Because the Potomac is too big for shocks or poisons to be practical, biologists worry that the snakeheads will continue to breed and spread.

Snakeheads aren't the only invasive species wreaking havoc in the United States. Other harmful organisms—bugs that destroy crops, alien fungi that eat trees, and other ecosystem-destroying fish—infiltrate our borders regularly. Such invasive species, according to one Cornell University study, cost the American economy as much as $138 billion annually by damaging natural resources and agriculture production. Some are already on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of banned species and make it through anyway in the suitcases of unscrupulous importers or the under-inspected bilges of commercial ships. But many exotic species are imported legally by pet shops and exotic food stores because of an oddity of the law. Under current statute, the government can only ban a species *after* it has already caused substantial ecological damage. Thus, environmentalists have lately pushed to replace this system with a "clean list" strategy, under which importers would be required to prove that foreign species are safe before importing them. (Australia and New Zealand both adopted "clean lists" during the 1990s, and have seen their costs from invasive damage plummet.)

In Washington, the most arcane trade has its own membership organization with lobbyists on staff—and even a foot-long prehistoric garbage truck has its defenders.

But any effort to staunch the flow of new invasive species is liable to face an uphill fight. In Washington, the most sensible-seeming legislation must fight through the tangle of organized interest groups, the most arcane trade has its own membership organization with lobbyists on staff, and even a foot-long prehistoric garbage truck has its defenders.

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The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council is headquartered in a sprawling, big-windowed, glass-and-brick office building in downtown Washington. On a hot Sunday afternoon last month, I paid a visit there to Marshall Meyers, the group's executive director and a self-styled intellectual—his shelves are crammed full of books on Middle Eastern history. We sat at a long oak table in the conference room, which was decorated with a large oil painting of a Kimodo Dragon perched on a rock, its forked tongue lashing somewhat creepily behind Meyers. The building's air conditioning didn't seem to be working properly, and Meyers, a tall, heavyset man, was sweating profusely—probably from the heat, but perhaps from the Sisyphean task of arguing against any effort by the federal government to ban these vicious killer fish.

There's no definitive proof, he told me, to support the charges in the popular press that snakeheads had been released into the wild by frightened owners—and therefore, he said, pet shops and importers may be entirely innocent. "It's a knee-jerk reaction to blame the aquarium industry," Meyers said. Instead, he speculates, the fish in the Potomac may have been dumped there by a few unscrupulous individuals who had been breeding them locally: "I suspect snakeheads have been in these waters for a long, long time."

This was an artful dodge. There is zero evidence that snakeheads had been in the wild here until very recently, and even if some were breeding them domestically, the stocks must originally have derived from China. Didn't it make sense, I asked, to move to a clean list system that would ban the import of potentially dangerous creatures like snakeheads?

Meyers leaned back and smiled broadly, then pounced. "The

The Washington Monthly's

Monthly Journalism Award

Kevin Sack and Alicia Mundy

"A Dose of Denial"

Los Angles Times

March 28, 2004

In October 1999, a study sponsored by drug industry groups concluded that the use of PPA, a chemical common in over-the-counter cough suppressants and diet aids, was associated with an increased risk of a deadly form of stroke. Veteran pharmaceutical investigators Sack and Mundy document in stunning detail the efforts of the drug companies over the next year—not to pull their products from the shelves, but to shield their study from investigators and deny that such a link exists. Even after the FDA caught on (one year later) and asked pharmaceutical manufacturers to pull PPA products from the shelves, the drug companies were still trying to duck the regulation—behavior reminiscent of tobacco execs trying to spin science.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to one or more newspaper, magazine, radio, or television stories (or series of stories) that demonstrate a commitment to the public interest. We are particularly interested in reporting that explains the successes and failures of government agencies at all levels and of other institutions such as the media, corporations, unions, and foundations that contribute to the existence or solution of public problems. Please send nominations (including a copy of the article or broadcast text) to The Washington Monthly Journalism Award, 733 15th Street, NW, Suite 520, Washington, DC 20005. Or email us at editors@washingtonmonthly.com.

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problem with clean lists is how can you block all invasives when you don't fundamentally know what invasives are?" he asked. "The science isn't there yet."

The regions of the United States are so ecologically diverse, he continued, that plants and animals that are native to, say, the bayous of Louisiana may be very damaging to local environments in the northern Rocky Mountains. So where should one draw the line? Should it be illegal for Pacific Northwest oyster farmers to raise, as they do now, species of oysters that originated off the coast of South Carolina?

Another artful dodge. While it may be theoretically possible for a domestic species to migrate and cause substantial economic damage elsewhere in the United States, the pet industry cannot point to a single example of this ever happening.

Having tried to attack the science, Meyers then attempted what might be called the Rush Limbaugh defense. Just like the famed talk-show host once blamed the press for going easy on the on-field performance of Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback Donovan McNabb because of his race, Meyers accused environmentalists who support clean lists of failing to point the finger at the real perpetrators. "Critics are afraid to address the ethnic side," Meyers told me. "You're not going to find snakeheads at your average pet store. But it's politically incorrect to say it's in the Asian live food market. These things are being flown in daily from China." And, indeed, such markets are widespread: Undercover agents have

The pet lobbyist attempted what might be called the Rush Limbaugh defense, accusing environmentalists of failing to point the finger at the real perpetrators—Chinese groceries. "Critics are afraid to address the ethnic side," he told me.

obtained snakehead specimens from Asian live food vendors in New York, Houston, Orlando, St. Louis, and other cities.

In recent months, 15 states and the District of Columbia have made it illegal to own or import snakeheads. But it will probably take a federal ban and federal inspectors to stop trafficking.

After speaking with Meyers, I tracked down an Asian live fish market located in a small grocery store in Washington's Chinatown. There were no snakeheads advertised as such in this market, but I discovered a tank labeled "China Catfish" that matched photos and descriptions of what I was looking for. The proprietor ignored my question about whether this was in fact a snakehead, insisting it was a "very special fish," and that this was all I really needed to know. There was nothing to stop me from buying this "very special fish," driving down to the Potomac, and feeding the snakehead terror in the Washington region. Instead, I bought a pound of fresh tuna and headed home.

Eric Pfeiffer writes for *National Journal's* Hotline.

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Parents, Trapped

By Sandy Bergo

Like most political reporters, we here at *The Washington Monthly* devote a fair amount of space to criticizing politicians and bureaucrats when they do a bad job. So, it's only fair that we let our readers know when those politicians and bureaucrats make a real effort to fix things. Nearly two years ago, the *Monthly* reported on widespread problems at the state agencies charged with collecting and distributing child-support money. (See "Money for Nothing," October 2002.) It turned out that, while those agencies had gotten much better at collecting child support from deadbeat parents—through payroll deductions, seizures of tax refunds, and other methods adopted during the late 1990s—they weren't very good at getting that money to those for whom it was intended.

All told, hundreds of millions of dollars were sitting around in bank accounts, a casualty of outdated information technology, understaffing, and plain old indifference. And despite evidence suggesting that matters could be greatly improved if the federal government put pressure on the states to audit and improve their child-support systems, officials at the Department of Health and Human services told the *Monthly* they were reluctant to intervene and that the states should fix the problem on their own.

But once our article appeared, Congress began to take a closer look. In December 2002, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee—which oversees federal child-support enforcement—ordered the General Accounting Office to examine the problem of undisbursed child support. Released this past April, the GAO's final report confirms many of the problems to which the *Monthly* had originally drawn attention, resulting in millions of dollars in payments delayed or never reaching families. Moreover, the GAO found the states' accounting of undistributed funds to be woefully inaccurate and unreliable. Gerri Jensen, president of the Association for Children for Enforcement of Support, says the report paints a picture of a system that is "50 percent broken"—collections are up, but distribution isn't. "They're supposed to just keep records and transfer the money. I don't know if anybody understands, but that is their whole job," she says. "It's appalling."

Moreover, the GAO found that some of the federal agencies which are supposed to help make sure that child support gets where it's supposed to haven't been doing a very good job. Take the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OSCE), the federal agency charged with monitoring child-support distribution. Our article had revealed that even though OSCE was aware that support distribution was a mess, agency officials believed the states were doing the best job they could. When questioned by GAO investigators, the officials argued that OSCE didn't have enough staff to audit undistributed support without substantially slowing down their performance of other duties, such as auditing collections and cost-effectiveness.

Sen. Grassley wasn't convinced. "The department seems to want to find excuses instead of solutions when it comes to verifying and reviewing undistributed collection data," he said in a statement issued after the release of the GAO report. "It's important that we stop guessing and start knowing the extent and scope of the problem of undistributed child support payments." When I called OSCE commissioner Sherri Heller, she bristled when I mentioned Grassley's statement, but conceded that she'd changed her own approach since she first told the *Monthly* back in 2002, that she counts on the news media, rather than the federal government, to push states to perform better. "I've come so far in my thinking since we first talked," she says. Last year, the OSCE began to ask states to report more specific information about their backlogs. (Even the GAO was unable to come up with reliable total figure for the amount of undistributed child support held nationwide.) At the very least, those numbers will provide a clearer picture of the magnitude of the problem.

Another federal agency criticized by the GAO is the Department of the Treasury. Under federal law, adults who owe child support can now have their tax refunds confiscated and sent to state agencies for distribution to the custodial parents. However, in cases where the deadbeat parent had remarried, those agencies were allowed to hold the checks for up to six months, in case the couple had filed a joint tax return and the new spouse asked the IRS for his or her portion of the refund. The problem was that many states had gotten used to sitting on all checks from all remarried parents for the full six months—despite evidence, the GAO reported, that most spouses filed their claims upfront, along with their tax returns, obviating the need for a delay. In such cases, the IRS will now calculate the amount owed to the custodial parent and the new spouse simultaneously, which means the states can immediately distribute whatever child support is owed. The new procedure takes effect for the 2005 tax season, says Martin Mills, an assistant commissioner in the Department of Treasury's Financial Management Service, a sister agency to the IRS. "We have been talking about it for some time, but it's never been given to us as a priority until recently, based on our conversations with the General Accounting Office."

Sandy Bergo is a freelance journalist based in Washington, D.C.

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EMAIL OF THE MONTH

Date: Mon, 10 May 2004 11:32:11 -0400
To: *****@hq.nasa.gov
From: *****@nasa.gov
Subject: NASA's Policy on the Use of The Vision for Space Exploration

Please note the following message from the Office of Public Affairs:

From now on, per Glenn Mahone, when we talk about or write about the new space exploration vision that President Bush put out in January, please refer to it as: The Vision for Space Exploration

It's not the President's new vision, it's not NASA's new vision... it's just the Vision for Space Exploration. Since it's a new initiative, we're treating it as a proper noun, so the V, S and E get capitalized. This isn't something we should actively tell the media about. Just start casually using it this way from now on.

If you have any questions, please call me.

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WHO'S WHO

We hear that the big debate in the campaign of **John F. Kerry** is whether the candidate should visit Iraq. Stay tuned.

All campaign staffs try to control the flow of information to and from their candidate. Smart candidates seek to circumvent this barrier by carrying their own cell phones and sharing the number with a handful of longtime friends and advisors. John Kerry is one of them. Among those who have the number and with whom Kerry talks frequently are former U.N. ambassador **Richard Holbrooke** and Sen. **Ted Kennedy** (D-Mass.). Kerry also takes calls from—and listens closely to—a group of old friends, as *The New York Times* reported late last month. There's **Tom Kiley**, a veteran Boston pollster; **John Martilla**, a longtime Boston strategist; **Ron Rosenblith**, a political director of Kerry campaigns from the 1980s; **David Thorne**, a college classmate; and **Michael Whouley**, the political operative widely credited with getting the Senator's Iowa ground operation in shape last fall and helping pull out the win in that crucial first primary.

Another frequent caller is Rep. **Edward Markey** (D-Mass). He and Kerry have not been particularly close through the years, but Markey won Kerry's affection with his tireless advocacy of the Senator's primary campaign, even in its darkest hours.

Markey was one of several from the Kerry camp who tried to dissuade **Ralph Nader** from running. Over the course of several conversations, mostly by phone, Markey floated a number of arguments including, we're told, the possibility that Nader might become some kind of "consumer advocate czar" in the Kerry administration. The congressman's chief of staff, **David Moulton**, who once worked for Nader, will say only that Markey urged Nader to "use his leverage" to get Kerry to make consumer issues a more prominent part of his campaign agenda. Asked by our colleague **Paul Glastris**, whose wife (and *Monthly* books editor) **Kukula Glastris** also once worked for consumer advocate, whether the consumer czar job had been floated, Nader responded: "Post-modern Greek mythology."

Speaking of phones and doorkeepers, it's widely understood that to have real influence in Washington, one must be on good terms, not so much with Cabinet secretaries, as with White House secretaries—that is, the assistants who sit in the outer offices of the president's senior advisors. As with much else in this town, uber-lobbyist/anti-tax activist **Grover Norquist** seems to understand this rule as well as anybody. Norquist had a deal with **Susan Ralston**, who until recently was the assistant to **Karl Rove.** An unnamed Republican lobbyist recently told *Salon.com*: "Susan took a message for Rove, and then called Grover to ask if she should put the caller through to Rove. If Grover didn't approve, your call didn't go through."

How did Norquist attain such influence over Ralston? Flowers every Friday? Redskins tickets? The answer, actually, is what the White House ethics lawyers call a "preexisting relationship." Ralston had formerly worked for lobbyist **Jack Abramoff**, a close friend of Norquist's and a top fundraiser for House majority whip **Tom DeLay** (R-Texas).

Ralston has since left the pressure cooker White House job for possibly the most isolated island in Washington. She is now executive assistant to **Eddy R. Badrina**, the senior advisor of the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

When Secretary of State **Colin Powell** and Undersecretary **Richard Armitage** leave the administration before the start of a possible second Bush term—as their aides are saying they will—who might replace them? One possibility for the Armitage slot, we hear, is **Robert Blackwill**, the former ambassador to India and current National Security Council staffer who President **George W. Bush** put in charge of the "Iraqi Stabilization Group." That unit was set up in October 2003 to take authority

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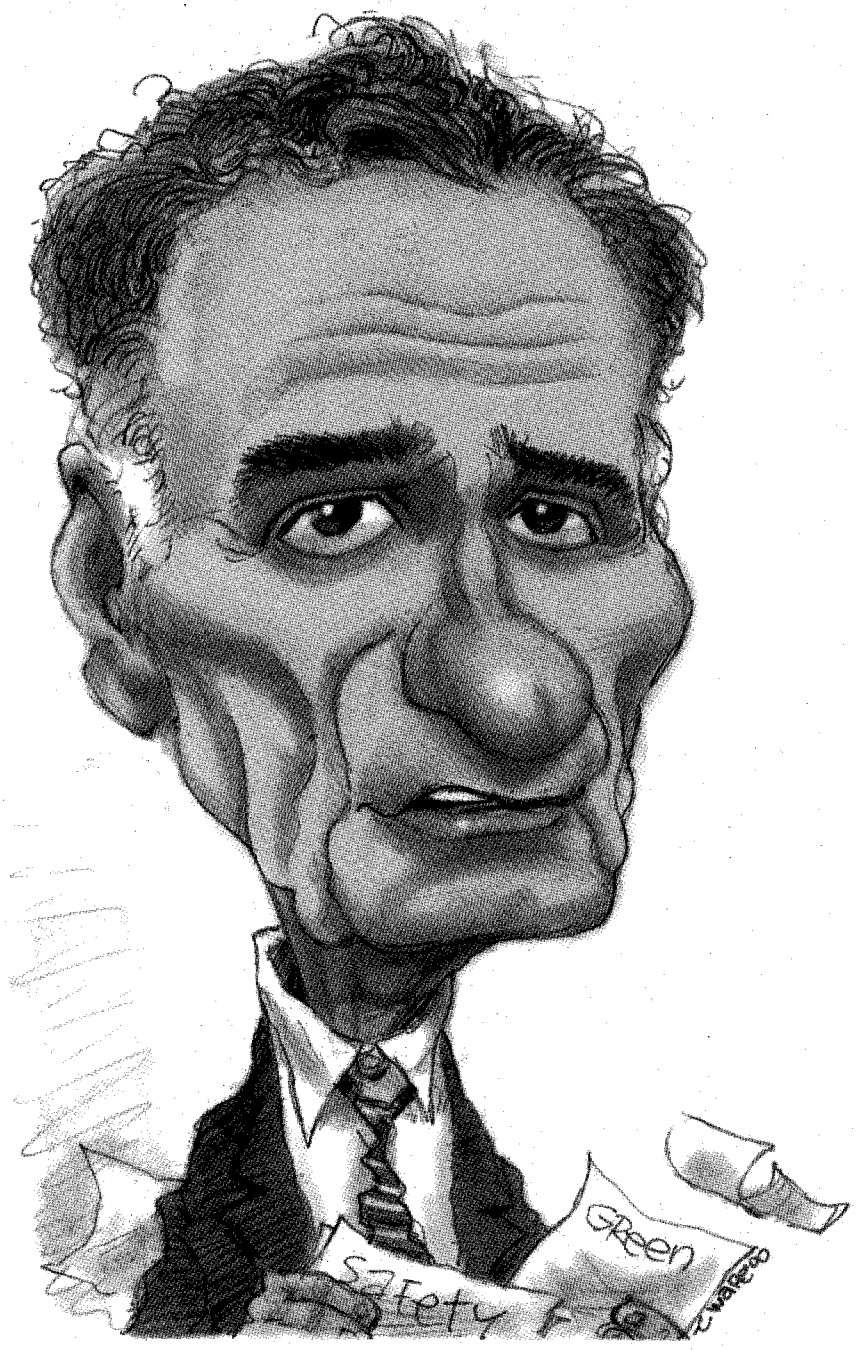
for the increasingly botched U.S. occupation of Iraq out of the hands of Defense, State, and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad and place it inside the White House. The job was so miserable that, according to *The Washington Post*'s **Dana Milbank**, the three other members of Blackwill's team, **Anna M. Perez**, **Gary R. Edson**, and **Frances F. Townsend**, drifted away.

But Blackwill confirmed his reputation as a wily and determined operator late last month, when he helped outmaneuver **Lakhdar Brahimi**, the U.N. envoy charged with picking a new prime minister for Iraq. Rather than wait for Brahimi's choice, Blackwill persuaded members of the Iraqi Governing Council to coalesce around **Ayad Alawi**, a Shiite physician with ties to the CIA and little domestic constituency in Iraq—which means, presumably, that he'll have to rely on the United States for support.

The Bush administration has seldom been shy about booting out former Clinton appointees from federal jobs. So, why has it decided to keep on **Armando Falcon Jr.**, the Texas Democrat who heads the Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight, which oversees Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac? The Bush administration had Falcon's successor picked out as early as February 2003, when it nominated former J.P. Morgan Chase lobbyist **Mark C. Brickell**. But Brickell withdrew his name from consideration in January, after the Senate Banking Committee failed to act on his nomination for nearly a year, and nobody else has been tapped to replace him. Part of the reason for Falcon's survival may be that he has become, unexpectedly, politically beneficial. With Fannie and Freddie facing scathing criticism over inaccuracies in their financial statements, having a Democratic Clinton appointee as their chief regulator offers the administration a modicum of political cover.



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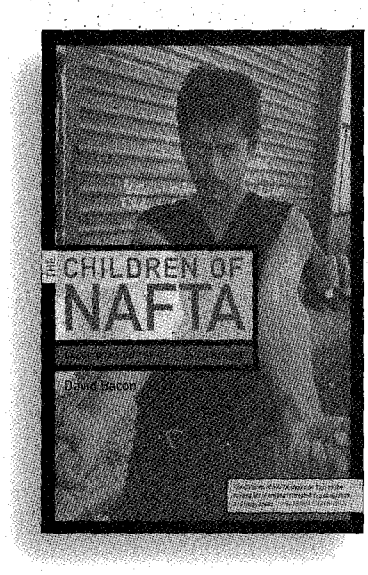

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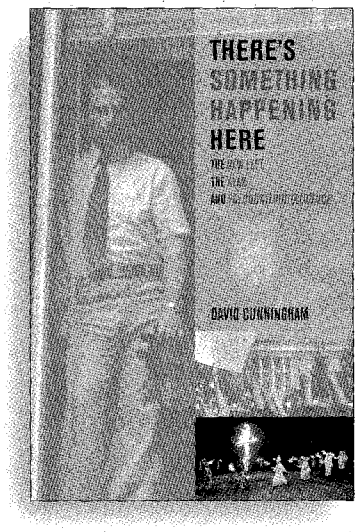

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Perverse Polarity

The mainstream media bemoans the lack of civility in Washington—but won't say who's responsible.

By Paul Glastris

About a decade ago, national news organizations regularly swooped in to various university campuses to report on the ideological battles then brewing there. Faculties and student bodies were bitterly divided over affirmative action, speech codes, and academic freedom. Archetypes of right (a musty old professor or a white male young Republican) and left (jargon-spouting activists or faculty members) could be found to represent the ideological poles, mutually hostile and philosophically uncompromising.

In one sense these descriptions reflected a certain objective truth: Campuses were indeed polarized. In another sense, though, they missed the story completely. The ideological gulf on campuses did not result from the right and left tugging equally hard in opposite directions. It resulted from the extremism of the academic left, which was seeking both radically to change the culture of the campus and, in many cases, to intimidate their critics into silence.

There's something similar about the way the national press has been describing the polarization of our political culture over the last few years. It is a cliché to observe that the parties have drawn further apart, the center no longer holds, and partisans on both sides have withdrawn further into mutual loathing and ever more-homogenous and antagonistic groupings. Where the analysis goes wrong is in its assumption, either explicit or implicit, that both parties bear equal responsibility for this state of affairs. While partisanship may now be deeply entrenched among their voters and their elites, the truth is that the growing polarization of American politics results primarily from the growing radicalism of the Republican Party.

Paul Glastris is the editor in chief of *The Washington Monthly.*

This is the sort of reality that most journalists know perfectly well to be true but cannot bring themselves to say, though this increased polarization drives them crazy. Almost without exception, mainstream reporters in Washington see moderation and bipartisanship as inherently virtuous. (Indeed, reverence for these qualities is essentially the defining belief of the Washington establishment.) Read almost any account of bills becoming law, and you'll notice the reporter's obvious affection for centrists who work both sides of the aisle. Yet they are unable to honestly explain to readers what's causing the decline of bipartisanship, thanks to another form of press bias: The desire not to seem biased. As practiced by the modern press, "objective" journalism requires avoiding the appearance of favoring one party over the other—even when the facts merit such a treatment. That's why, when news stories discuss polarization, they bend over backward to avoid laying the "blame" on the political right.

Primary schooling

A classic example is a recent *Washington Post* column by David Broder, a justly-respected reporter and columnist famous for, and much beloved because of, his

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advocacy of bipartisanship. "The roots of political gridlock in Washington and of the hyper-partisanship dividing "red" and "blue" America," Broder wrote in May, can be seen in the fates of two lawmakers. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), a moderate, survived a near-death primary challenge this spring, while Rep. Jack Quinn (R-N.Y.), another veteran moderate, announced his retirement, paving the way for a likely Democratic takeover of his heavily-unionized district. These two races "illustrate how the ideological lines dividing the parties are being etched ever deeper," Broder opined, as if describing some impersonal geologic force. Indeed, Broder connected these two races to a decades-old realignment that "has been so gradual that its effects are often overlooked": the slow fading away of conservative Southern Democrats and liberal Northern Republicans.

As practiced by the modern press, "objective" journalism requires avoiding the appearance of favoring one party over the other—even when the facts merit such a treatment.

Broder is of course right that such a realignment has taken place. But the vast majority of truly right-wing Democrats defected to their natural modern home in the GOP years ago. The interesting question is what's driving the process now. Broder didn't venture a guess, but the answer is implicit in the examples he chose. Quinn is retiring from a party that has treated moderates like him with disdain. Specter was almost bumped off by Rep. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.), a conservative hardliner whose campaign received substantial funding from ideologically-uncompromising right-wing groups such as the Club of Growth.

Nothing remotely like this has occurred on the Democratic side. Sure, a number of moderate-to-conservative Democratic Southerners, such John Breaux (D-La.) and Bob Graham (D-Fla.) are retiring this year. But with the exception of Zell Miller (D-Ga.), none seem to be doing so because of anger at, or pressure from, the liberal wing of their party. Quite the contrary: hand wringing over the loss of moderate Southern Democrats is a party-wide obsession. Indeed, Senate Democrats were so afraid of losing Miller's vote in the Senate that neither his frequent and virulent denunciations of the party leadership nor his decision to endorse Bush for re-election provoked a single public rebuke. (By contrast, when Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) last month questioned the wisdom of cutting taxes during wartime, the GOP Speaker of the House, Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) questioned whether McCain understood the meaning of sacrifice.) And it's hard to remember the last time a moderate Democratic senator faced an ugly, well-funded primary challenge by a hardcore left-liberal, the way Specter did from his right.

That the Democrats are still pretty congenial to their centrists suggests the degree to which the party has become, if not less partisan, then surely more ideologically moderate. Indeed, the recent Democratic primary in Pennsylvania illustrates the point. To challenge Specter in November, the state's Democratic voters chose Rep. Joe Hoeffel (D-Pa.). A member in good standing of the New Democrat coalition in the House, Hoeffel represents a majority-Republican district and supported, among other things, Bush's No Child Left Behind Act and the Iraq war resolution.

An even better illustration is the Democratic presidential primary. While the entire field of candidates joined in harsh, partisan denunciations of President Bush, the results render laughable the idea that the party is somehow "moving to the left." Two candidates, Rev. Al Sharpton and Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) offered traditional liberal-left positions (universal single-payer health care, an immediate pull-out from Iraq),

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yet garnered negligible shares of the vote. Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), a labor-endorsed liberal populist, came in fourth in Iowa, failing even to win a majority of union members in that famously left-leaning caucus. Former Gov. Howard Dean, who ran as a liberal firebrand—despite a record as a fiscal conservative who won the NRA's endorsement in Vermont—famously fizzled. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), who supported the invasion of Iraq and ran as a war hero, won the lion's share of delegates. The runners-up were Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.), a Southern moderate, and Wesley Clark, a retired four-star general who until recently had been a registered Republican. After locking up the nomination, Kerry highlighted his centrist policies (such as maintaining Bush's middle-class tax cuts), repeatedly refused to set a date for pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq, and, through surrogates, openly courted McCain for vice president.

Yet even when journalists' own evidence plainly shows that one party has become more moderate and the other more ideologically extreme, they can't bring themselves to say so. In March, *USA Today* reported that "President Bush is running for a second term in a more polarized atmosphere than any president since the Gallup Poll began measuring the partisan gap in presidential job approval." The story proceeded to divulge Bush's four-point plan to "deal with the polarized electorate." Here is the plan—as reported by *USA Today*—unabridged and in its entirety:

—Making few new proposals meant to satisfy conservatives
—Emphasizing tax cuts and other issues that appeal to voters in the middle
—Working to ensure that loyal Republicans turn out to vote
—Depicting Democratic candidate John Kerry as too far to the left for mainstream voters

Bush's plan, in other words, consists of eschewing new proposals and instead harping on old ones—tax cuts—that were originally designed to shore up the conservative base, while cranking up partisan loyalists and going negative on his opponent. It is, to say the least, a bit odd that Bush's plan was presented as a way to "deal with the polarized electorate" rather than as a fundamental cause of the polarization.

This kind of forced evenhandedness isn't just limited to the big national papers. Last February, *Columbus Dispatch* columnist Joe Hallett wrote:

> This is a tough year for moderates. While they want the presidential campaign to focus on creating jobs, improving education, keeping the nation safe, and providing health and retirement security, legislative combatants in Washington and Columbus exploit the wedge issues that split the electorate.
>
> Overtime pay, faith-based funding, same-sex marriages, concealed weapons, abortion, charter schools, creationism in science classes, the official state fish—these are the issues our federal and state lawmakers debate in a nation at war and a state bleeding jobs.
>
> Strategists from both parties use such issues to turn moderates into hardened partisans, forcing them into one extreme camp or the other.

This is a curious passage. Aside from the example of charter schools (which tend to have bipartisan support) and the state fish debate (about which I know nothing), the other issues Hallett lists are all policies that *Republicans* are pushing, mostly as wedges to divide Democrats from centrist voters.

Polar opposites

Back in March, *The Washington Post* ran a lengthy, widely-read series that attempted to explain how the polarization of American politics came about, but wound up illustrating the press' weird inability to state the obvious. "For voters in the middle," the *Post* complained, "this election may aggravate their feeling that politics no longer speaks to them, that it has become a dialogue of uncompromising extremes." Besides such exogenous factors as the end of the Cold War, the *Post* series laid the blame on two phenomena.

The first was the election of Ronald Reagan and the conservative ascendancy which followed, shifting the GOP's center of gravity away from the likes of such pragmatists as Eisenhower, Ford and Nixon toward a leader who "framed his presidency in ideological terms" and made it "uncomfortable for liberals to remain in the GOP."

But while it's true that his presidency marked a turning point in the conservative takeover of the GOP, Reagan was more ideologically flexible and open to working with Democrats than his rhetoric implied or conservatives today like to remember. Reagan's most distinct achievements remain marginal rate tax cuts and a military buildup. Each was supported by dozens of Democrats in both chambers. But he also raised taxes in the face of deficits, signed a dramatic arms control pact with the Soviet Union, and engineered a sweeping tax reform which forced the rich to shoulder a larger share of the tax burden. Moreover, while Reagan appointed many ideologues to his administration, he also gave important roles to many pragmatists, notably Howard Baker, Richard Darman, and James Baker. Liberals may have envied Reagan his popularity and disliked his policies, but he made it possible for Democrats to work with him, and they did.

How about the *Post*'s second factor—Bill Clinton's presidency? "Though he campaigned as a moderate Democrat, and delivered on such longtime Republican goals as a balanced budget and welfare reform," the *Post*

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explains, "Clinton's administration ultimately proved highly divisive." But Clinton proved divisive not, as the article implies, because he or his party grew more uncompromising or extreme. Just the opposite: Clinton was dragging his party closer to the center. This was divisive within the Democratic Party, because liberals were betrayed and outraged by his challenges to traditional Democratic orthodoxy on such policies as welfare and crime. And it was divisive in Washington because the Republican Party was becoming so uncompromising and extreme that it found even a moderate Democrat in the White House completely unacceptable.

Here, too, the evidence is pretty clear. While scores of Democrats supported tax and spending blueprints offered up by Reagan and the first President Bush, not a single Republican in either house of Congress voted for Clinton's 1993 budget. The budget essentially renounced Keynesian spending advocated by economic liberals such as Robert Reich and embraced deficit reduction, a longtime goal of the business community and the mostly-Republican deficit hawks in Congress. But it also raised marginal rates on the wealthy a bit, so Republicans, many of whom had gone along with Reagan's tax increases, voted against Clinton's entire budget package.

Indeed, quite early on in Clinton's presidency, GOP leaders explicitly decided to make the failure of Clinton's presidency their overriding goal, regardless of, and indeed in spite of, his attempts to move to the middle. The most telling moment came during Clinton's second big initiative, health-care reform. By any objective measure, the United States had—and still has—a terrible system, which spent far more per capita on health care than any other country while leaving a higher percentage of our population uninsured than in any other advanced industrialized nation. While many Republicans were skeptical of Clinton's preferred solution to the problem, they at first accepted a responsibility to pass some sort of plan. Yet they came to be persuaded by the advice of conservative operative William Kristol, who urged in a series of influential memos that the GOP oppose the Clinton plan "sight unseen," and commit to sinking whatever plan was devised—on the grounds that successful passage of any plan would keep the Democratic Party in power. In keeping with this advice, Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole even abandoned his own health-reform proposal, the better to create gridlock.

Bunkered hill

When the Republicans took over Congress in 1995, the polarization began to get even worse. In Reagan's time there still remained a strong sense in Washington that politics was not purely a zero-sum game between the parties. Democrats and Republicans shared certain goals in common—sometimes high-minded goals such as getting rid of loopholes in the tax code, and sometimes tawdry ones, such as protecting incumbents, but shared goals all the same. But fierce partisanship and demonization of the Democratic majority had helped the GOP take back Congress. (Then-Rep. Newt Gingrich once distributed a memo to his colleagues specifying which words to use when describing Democrats, from "corruption, crises, decay, deeper, destroy, destructive, devour" to "self-serving, sensationalists, shallow, sick.") Emboldened, the new GOP majority set out to systematically eliminate what remained of the capital's bipartisan political culture.

On the Hill, the old practice of resolving differences in committee and bringing to the floor bills that had large bipartisan support went out the window. In its stead emerged a top-down process whereby most legislation would be crafted by the GOP leadership and subjected to up-or-down votes by the rest of Congress. On many bills, especially those on which corporate lobbies have a keen interest, Republican leaders began to engineer party-line votes so as to isolate Democratic centrists—depriving them of opportunities to vote for compromises and build moderate records that would keep them in office in swing districts. Breaking precedent, Republicans began to exclude Democrats from conference negotiations on important bills and forbid them from offering alternative legislation or amendments of their own.

It's true that this sort of behavior was not unknown to Republicans when they were in the minority. During the late 1980s, for example, House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Texas) held open the floor vote on a crucial reconciliation bill for an extra 20 minutes past the traditional 15-minute period so as to corral an extra vote for the Democratic side. Republicans complained vehemently at the time and cited Wright's action for years after as an example of the Democratic majority's unfairness and lack principle. Yet since taking control of the House in 1995, analyst Norm Ornstein has observed, Republican leaders have gone over the 15-minute limit at least a dozen times. (Most recently, Hastert held open the vote on the Medicare prescription-drug bill for an extra three hours, basically until he had been able to pressure a few skeptical Republicans to vote for the leadership's bill.) Even small courtesies have fallen by the wayside. GOP leaders have denied the Democrats rooms in which to caucus and, as Michael Crowley reported in *The New Republic* last year, the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), has decided to stop holding the committee's traditional bipartisan holiday party.

Even as they polarized the Hill, Republicans have also been doing their best to undermine the traditionally bipartisan lobbying culture on K Street. Beginning in the late 1990s, they launched an effort to purge Washington's lobbyist shops of Democrats and turn

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them into an appendage of the Republican Party. The bipartisan coloration that had previously characterized the business lobbies may not have been terribly edifying, but it was undeniably an important pillar undergirding the sense of shared purpose between the two parties.

The modern GOP, however, has no use for bipartisanship. As a conservative maxim originally coined by Dick Armey, the recently-retired Republican majority leader, puts it, "Bipartisanship is another name for date rape." It is almost impossible to imagine any leading Democratic politician or activist voicing the same sentiment. For better or for worse, they remain bound to the Washington establishment's notion that bipartisanship is a virtue to be striven for.

The modern GOP has no use for bipartisanship. As a conservative maxim originally coined by Dick Armey, the recently-retired Republican majority leader, puts it, "Bipartisanship is another name for date rape."

Meanwhile, the GOP is busy exporting its hypertrophied partisanship outside the Beltway, overturning even more previously-accepted standards of political behavior along the way. When Republicans won a majority in the Texas legislature in 2002, they proceeded—at the behest of Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas)—to rearrange the congressional districts that had been drawn following the 2000 census, the first time in modern history that a legislature had redistricted in between the taking of censuses. The aim was to squeeze out six or seven conservative Democrats who usually voted with the GOP, simply because replacing them with conservative Republicans would cushion the GOP's majority in the House.

This GOP strategy is now spreading to other states. As the *Denver Post*'s John Aloysius Farrell reported last year—in a rare article that put responsibility for increased polarization where it belonged—the legislative tactics pioneered by Washington Republicans are appearing in once-collegial state legislatures, where the differences between parties are usually not as apparent. "We are trying to change the tones in the state capitals—and turn them toward bitter nastiness and partisanship," leading conservative activist Grover Norquist explained to the *Denver Post*. Why? On the belief that, as Patrick Buchanan once articulated, if the country can be polarized between hard conservatives and hard liberals, the majority of Americans are more likely to take their chances with the former than with the latter. Yet unlike Farrell, most national pundits dare not state the strategy that conservatives *themselves* admit they are using to polarize state politics. Instead they affect the value-neutral, pox-on-both-houses tone that the otherwise estimable *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry employed recently when he bemoaned the effects of gerrymandered redistricting. "Political campaigns are increasingly divisive," he wrote. "Moderate voices are marginalized in both major parties."

Choice point

Now, again, you could argue that there's nothing wrong with polarization—that the genteel traditions of old served only to muddle political choices and deny voters the opportunity to clearly express their preferences. After all, hewing to the center is well and good if you're satisfied with the political debate as it exists today. But many voters do not share the press' affinity for compromise and bipartisanship. A principled conservative may prefer the center as it existed before the New Deal, while a principled liberal may prefer the pre-Reagan center. And if you desire those sorts of dramatic changes, working with both parties may not be possible.

The point is not necessarily that the Republicans have done wrong by being partisan and ideological. The point is that they have clearly taken the lead in dismantling bipartisanship by uniting around a radically conservative agenda and consciously—even gleefully—defying the old unwritten rules of politics that once kept partisanship and ideology in check. The same simply does not hold true on the other side of the political spectrum. You can say a lot of things about the Democrats. You can say the party's grassroots loathes Bush just as intensely as Republicans loathed Clinton. You can say Democratic members of Congress have, belatedly, become less naive about making deals with the Bush administration. But you can't say Democrats have moved farther to the left. They have recognized a radical presidency for what it is—but that does not make them radical as well.

Reporters for mainstream outlets have a difficult job trying to write about one of the most divisive of subjects, politics, in a way that does not alienate their heterogeneous readership or call forth too many outraged emails challenging their fairness. But they ought to find a way to acknowledge the obvious truth that Republican radicalism is driving the polarization of American politics. That goes double for those journalists and pundits most pained by the loss of bipartisan civility in Washington. They do their cause no good by clinging to the fiction that America's political polarization is equally the fault of both parties. Moderation and compromise can return to the nation's capital only if and when the GOP itself moves back to the civil center—which, over the long term, is probably in the party's electoral interest as well. Some tough love and honest talk from the nation's top political writers might hasten that day. ◆

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Closing the Leadership Gap:

Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World

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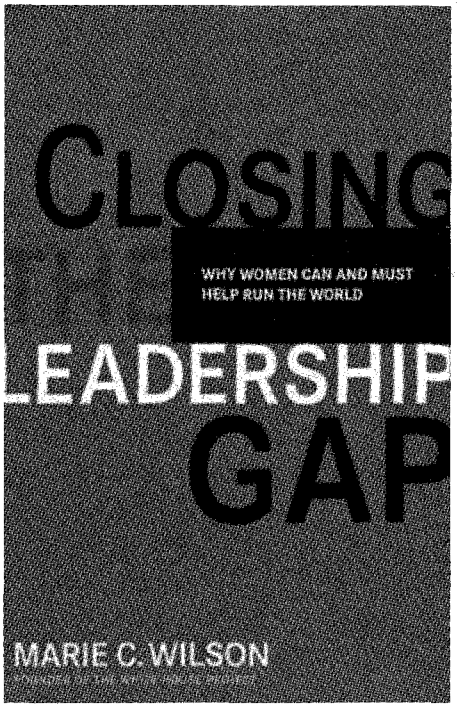

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Con Ed

How funds for community college became another Bush bait and switch.

By Alexander Barnes Dryer

President George W. Bush's State of the Union address this past January was not exactly a rousing success. Long on partisan sniping and short on new ideas, it actually led to a decline in Bush's approval ratings—the first time that's happened to a president since pollsters began keeping score. But several sentences in the speech did catch the ear of Steven Lee Johnson, president of Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Just before calling for more abstinence-education funding and increased steroid-abuse testing, Bush urged Congress to back his proposal to increase "support for America's fine community colleges, so they can train workers for industries that are creating the most new jobs."

Those words exhilarated Johnson. "This is probably the most significant support for community colleges that I've ever seen come out of any White House administration," he gushed to the local newspaper that night. Dayton, like many industrial cities, has been especially hard hit by job losses during the Bush years. And community colleges like his—which educate half of all post-secondary students in America—are ideally suited to the task of easing the burden of unemployment. In addition to providing low-cost college education to recent high school graduates, community colleges have become the default retraining system of the new economy. Every year, they help millions of adult workers who have lost employment in industries such as manufacturing or IT to retool for the jobs being created in such fields as nursing and accounting. Moreover, many economically hard-hit cities like Dayton are located in the key swing states that will likely determine the winner of this November's election. And thus Bush's proposal to boost money for community colleges would seem to be both good policy and good politics.

Except for one thing: Bush isn't actually trying to boost community college funding. He's trying to cut it. A careful look at the specifics of the administration's 2005 budget reveals that while the president has proposed a quarter of a billion dollars for the program he promised in the State of the Union address, he has simultaneously stripped away an even larger sum from other programs that support community colleges. On balance, under Bush's budget, community colleges will be worse off next year than they are now.

This shell game is all too typical of the way the Bush administration plays with the domestic policy budget. In his 2002 State of the Union address, the president promised to expand AmeriCorps funding by 50 percent. He then signed a budget that cut the program in half. Late last year, after sparking wild celebration in the space exploration community by authorizing a manned mission to Mars, the president included only $1 billion extra in NASA's budget to accomplish the mission—about one-thousandth the amount that ultimately will be needed. Recently, as *The New York Times'* Robert Pear has noted, Bush cabinet officials have been fanning out across key battleground states to tout grant awards in programs that the administration intends, in fact, to cut—from money for defibrillators to save the lives of heart-attack victims (proposed budget decrease: 82 percent) to subsidies to help police departments hire more cops (proposed budget decrease: 87 percent). And early drafts of the president's 2006 budget indicate he will slash domestic spending for all agencies.

There seems to be a pattern here. First, the president enters traditionally Democratic territory with rhetorical compassion, pushing new spending to meet domestic social needs. Second, while keeping up the rhetoric of change, he fails to put up the funding needed to implement that change, or quietly slashes the funding. Of course, Bush didn't invent

Alexander Barnes Dryer is a Washington writer.

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the idea of using poll-tested, small-bore spending initiatives to win over swing voters. That was a Bill Clinton innovation. The difference is that, unlike Clinton, Bush only pretends that there's any money behind his proposals.

Baited community

Downtown Dayton is a desolate place. Even in the middle of a business day, the streets are as deserted as more affluent cities' financial districts are on Sunday mornings. The metro area has lost more than 17,000 manufacturing jobs since Bush took office—more than 20 percent of its total job base. For those laid off from the automotive factories and other local manufacturers, there is still some hope. If they venture to the Job Center, a public-private career services center located just south of the heart of downtown Dayton, they will find a computer-based job-listing service with 1,500 new entries in its database. But fewer than half of the jobs listed are available to people without an associate or bachelor's degree—and fewer than a fifth of Dayton residents have such degrees.

Dayton has several institutions of higher education that could conceivably help residents cross this gap. The city is home to both the University of Dayton and Wright State University. But yearly tuition is nearly $20,000 at the University of Dayton. At Wright State, it's $4,800. Those are steep prices for many prospective working-class students, even with college aid. That's why so many are drawn to Sinclair Community College, where annual tuition is only $1,700. Located just off I-75, in the center of Dayton, Sinclair is one of the nation's largest community colleges. The campus—stark concrete blocks punctuated with deep recesses of black glass, all arranged around vast brick plazas—serves 24,000 students.

Dollar for dollar, it's hard to imagine a better way for Washington to fight unemployment, and underemployment, than to boost federal subsidies for community colleges. That's precisely what the Clinton administration did. In the 1990s, federal grants to community colleges grew by 20 percent in real terms, while overall federal student aid spending rose by half. Partly as a result, enrollment at community colleges and at 4-year universities burgeoned.

In the last few years, as tuition at 4-year colleges has climbed by 20 percent, community colleges have taken on even more students. Between 2001 and 2003, while enrollment at public 4-year colleges increased by 7 percent, enrollment at community colleges climbed 14 percent. Part of the growth has come from unemployed workers looking for new skills; as the job market improves, part of the wave might subside. But overall, enrollment at community colleges is destined to rise for several more years, thanks to the "echo boom": the children of baby boomers who are now swelling high school classes.

The trouble is that just as this tidal wave of students is hitting community colleges, the state and local governments that provide the bulk of aid to these schools have been hit by a massive budget squeeze. Funding from cash-starved states to community colleges has declined 13 percent in the last two years, and federal funding declined by a similar amount over the same period.

As a result, community colleges have had to turn away students for whom they have no classroom space or teachers. By Johnson's estimate, Sinclair had to turn away 1,000 applicants last year. And while the problem has not been much reported (community colleges not being a topic that fires the imagination of newspaper editors), it's national in scope. In California, community colleges did not have places for 175,000 prospective students last year; Florida turned away 30,000, and North Carolina 56,000.

Jobbed training

In this situation, a major infusion of cash from Washington would make perfect sense. And at first glance, the president's 2005 budget seems to do that, with a new $250-million grant program to community colleges. Look more carefully, however, and you'll find a series of offsetting cuts to traditional federal supports for community colleges. $64 million is cut from the Workforce Investment Act, which funds "one-stop" career centers and job training services at community colleges. Another $316 million is cut from the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act—the biggest source of federal grants to community colleges. A provision to shift another $1 billion in Perkins grants to a new fund that will make more of that money available to high schools, meaning less for community colleges. Finally, the budget proposes, for the third year in a row, to make no increase in the amount the average community-college student can receive in Pell grants, the federal government's main financial-aid program for low-income students, even as college tuitions continue to rise.

Add up all the cuts, and community colleges will probably be several hundred million dollars worse off under Bush's 2005 budget. Even Emily Stover Derocco, the assistant secretary of the Department of Labor who will oversee Bush's new $250 million grant, struggles to explain how the administration can claim to be helping community colleges in the face of these cuts. Her only defense is that the administration is "rethinking the very nature of vocational training."

Of course, bureaucrats like Stover are driven to say such things by the larger fiscal situation that the administration has chosen to put itself in. After three rounds of tax cuts and a costly war in Iraq, there simply isn't any money left in the federal budget for new initiatives, even for fairly modest things like community colleges—the kind of expenditures that might easily translate into votes in a key swing state. Yet rather than avoid making the promise at all, as a more cautious president might do, Bush continues, in his frequent trips to Ohio and other industrial states, to affirm his support for more spending on community college, even as his own budget officials attempt to cut it.

Such audacious claims have become the hallmark of Bush's style. So far, neither the press nor the Kerry campaign has caught up with this particular one. But there is still time. ◆

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Toon In

The best TV happens when no one is looking.

By Justin Peters

Every era has its hotbeds of cultural innovation, its gathering points where original thinkers and brilliant minds assemble and produce high-caliber works of art—London's Bloomsbury, Paris' Montmartre, New York's Greenwich Village. My candidate for the modern day Left Bank is the corner of Williams Street and 12th Street in downtown Atlanta, Ga., where you'll find a decrepit-looking old warehouse.

Inside, there are no ceiling tiles—the writers ripped them out by hand as soon as they moved in. The production staff works in a broad, rectangular basement-like space with open-doored offices lining the mural-covered walls, ping-pong and foosball tables in the hallway, and life-sized robots (presumably not real, although I'm not quite sure) guarding the back entrance. The place resembles nothing so much as a real-life Wonka World for people who like cartoons instead of candy (but if you do like candy, don't worry, there's a gigantic bowl full of it on the table). Moving through this scene—sauntering from office to office with various drawings in hand, congregating around the big table in the rear for a script read-through—are a mixture of pudgy gawkers and rail-thin middle-aged guys, most of them Southern natives. Several are married with families and wouldn't be out of place at a college football game or a PTA meeting. And every afternoon (great art doesn't get made in the mornings), these guys can be found sketching hillbilly squids or French fries with goatees, debating the funniness of various voices, all of it destined for eventual use in a block of subversive cartoons, known collectively as "Adult Swim," that airs late-nights, 11p.m.-5a.m., on Ted Turner's Cartoon Network.

Unless you're one of its growing number of insomniac fans, you may not have heard of Adult Swim. But

Adult Swim's "Space Ghost Coast to Coast" (right); All images courtesy of Cartoon Network

Justin Peters is a writer in Washington, D.C.

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these shows are among the most innovative, and increasingly popular, new programs on television today. The block includes such off-kilter postmodern cartoons as "Aqua Teen Hunger Force," a send-up of classic action-hero shows starring a life-sized talking milkshake prone to such bizarrely ill-informed pronouncements as "plaque is a figment of the liberal media and the dental industry to scare you into buying useless appliances and pastes"; "Sealab 2021," a workplace comedy where nobody can ever leave the underwater office; "Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law," a "Perry Mason"-like spoof in which a winged superhero with a law degree defends famous cartoon figures accused of various crimes; and "Home Movies," a show about a single mom, her movie-making son, and his alcoholic soccer coach, all united in their mutually amiable incompetence.

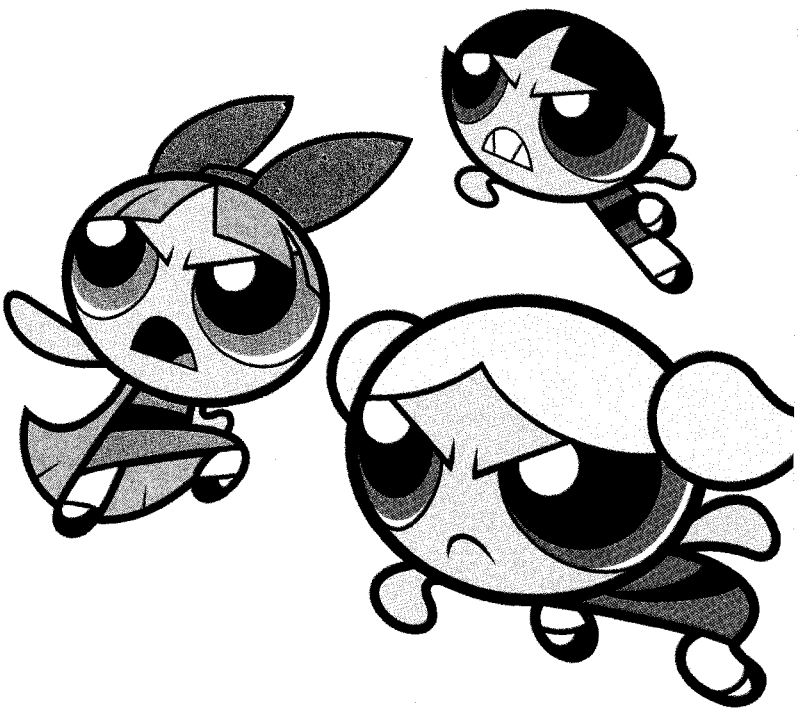
The Adult Swim fare now consistently rates as the top block in its time slot on cable among the coveted young adult demographic. In the last year alone, the ratings for the entire three-hour block jumped by over 60 percent, from around 180,000 viewers to 431,000 viewers (as of April); a few shows in the block, like "Family Guy" (about a dysfunctional Rhode Island family), regularly draw more than a million viewers. Most of those viewers are young men. In fact, for males age 18-24, Adult Swim now demolishes the ratings of broadcast standbys like Leno and Letterman—beating Leno by 36 percent and Letterman by a whopping 87 percent.

The Adult Swim entourage is only the latest in a series of consistently witty and original cartoons that have emerged on television in recent years—from "The Simpsons" to "South Park" to "King of the Hill." And this is on top of the plethora of fine feature-length animated films that have graced movie theaters such as *Monsters Inc.*, and the *Shrek* series. Indeed, if novels, pop music, and live action movies have been going through a bit of a fallow period, we are arguably living in a golden age of cartoons, one that rivals in creativity and appeal to the era of "Looney Tunes" and "Betty Boop" over half a century ago.

The emergence of such high-quality commercial animation begs an intriguing question about the entertainment industry as a whole. How is it that the same economy that gives us bland fodder like Vin Diesel, Evanescence, and "According To Jim" can sometimes suddenly produce the sort of wonderful, bizarre material that we see on Adult Swim? It's because the good stuff tends to come when nobody's looking—created by those on the fringes of the studio system, occupying marginal creative real estate with minimal supervision. In the natural world, punctuated evolution occurs when small groups find themselves geographically isolated and free from natural predators, allowing creatures with rare mutations to thrive and develop into entirely new species. So it is in entertainment: The best material has often come from the back alleys of the studio system. Though only 200 yards across the street from the Turner Entertainment corporate complex, the Adult Swim's Williams Street warehouse is miles away in terms of sensibilities—and it has given rise to an entirely new species of cartoons.

Between Betty Boop & Harvey Birdman

The most innovative shows and animation techniques have usually sprouted in the shadows of the large studios. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, legendary cartoonists Tex Avery and Chuck Jones, working in the Warner Brothers back lot, developed the popular wacky cartoon shorts that were shown in movie theaters before feature films. Bugs Bunny's taunting of Elmer Fudd and Wile E. Coyote's hapless attempts to catch the Road Runner remain iconic today because these films were legitimately funny, featuring pratfalls for the kids, innuendo for the adults, and the sort of quick, mischievous wit that transcended generational boundaries. Though the animation team was on the Warner Brothers' payroll, the cartoon studio was only minimally supervised by the studio brass. Apart from occasional revealing edicts such as "No gags about Ike," management allowed the animators the latitude to make cartoons on their own terms, with little outside interference—probably more as a result of indifference than of insight into the creative process. In his autobiography, Chuck Jones recalls a meeting with studio head Harry Warner during which Warner bellicosely stated that the only thing he knew about his animation division was that it made Mickey Mouse cartoons—which, in fact, were made by Disney.



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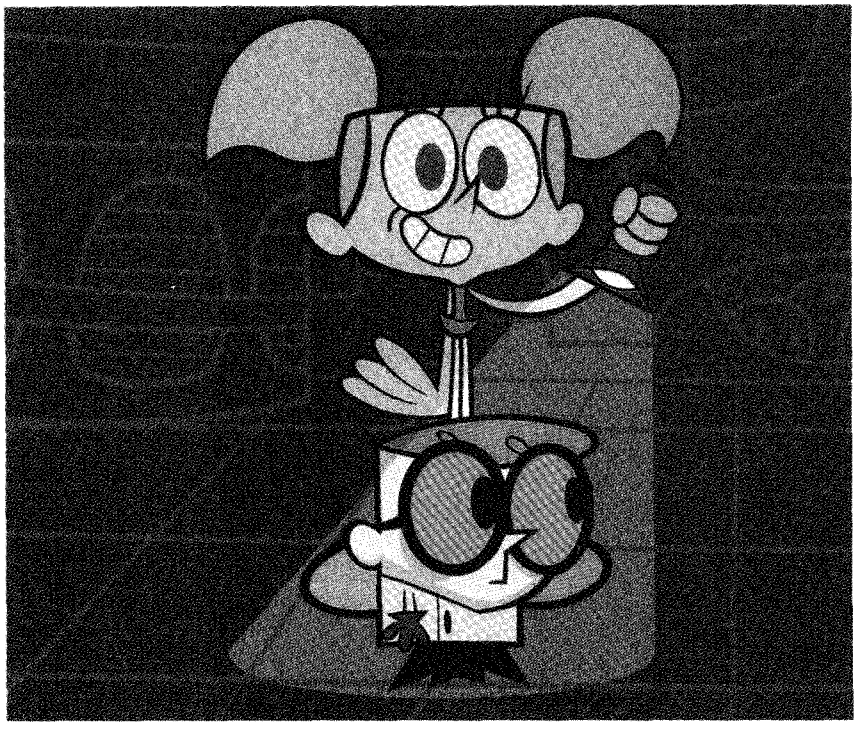
Beginning in the 1960s, as television expanded, network brass began searching for new cartoons to fill airtime, especially on Saturday mornings, when kids home from school dominated the viewing audience. But they wanted it done cheaply. In stepped the Hanna-Barbera studios, with a technique called planned animation, wherein only moving body parts were animated instead of the entire figure, rendering the rest of the body inexpensive background art. Hanna-Barbera's cartoons ranged from popular and forgettable Saturday morning shows like "Huckleberry Hound" and "Quick-DrawMcGraw" in the 1960s to "Penelope Pitstop" and "Hong Kong Phooey" in the 1970s. But some were somewhat laudable, such as "The Flintstones"—the first primetime animated sitcom, essentially an affectionate spoof of "The Honeymooners." Other minor studios like Jay Ward Productions developed shows such as "The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle," whose sneakily witty dialogue and over-the-top social send-ups presaged the smarts of later shows designed to appeal to mature audiences.



Like the old "Looney Tunes," the best of Cartoon Network's new shows aimed at children—among them "Dexter's Laboratory" (above) and "Powerpuff Girls" (left)—also appealed to parents with their clever dialogue and ironic wit.

The 1970s and early 1980s saw a downturn in cartoon quality, as the airwaves became cluttered with shows about innumerable latently homosexual superhero teams, or crass marketing tie-ins like Mattel/Filmation's "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe" or Marvel's "G.I. Joe"—shows not only specifically designed to appeal to children, but also to sell them low-quality action figures and accessories.

The mundane corporate animation cartel was first breached by the rise of a new television network—FOX. With 24 hours of airtime to fill, Rupert Murdoch's new network suddenly needed programming, and creative entrepreneurs seized the moment. "The Simpsons" began as a short feature in the comedy-variety program "The Tracey Ullman Show." In 1989, after these animated shorts had became more popular than the rest of the "The Tracey Ullman Show," FOX gave "The Simpsons" its own time slot, allowing considerable latitude to develop the show's unique voice. Once "The Simpsons" proved itself resoundingly and enduringly popular, a flood of new animated shows came crashing through these newly-opened gates in the early 1990s. Unsurprisingly, most of the shows that came from the networks were putrescent abortions like "Fish Police" or "Capitol Critters," as the usual network hacks, sensing a trend while failing to understand it, tried to graft typical sitcom structures on this "new" medium. But for every network failure, there was a less-heralded cable show like "Daria," the angsty adventures of a too-smart girl at odds with the world, or the oft-misunderstood "Beavis and Butthead," a wicked satire of the stupidity of modern culture which many viewers mistakenly took to be just another stupid cartoon. Both "Daria" and "Beavis and Butthead" aired, unsurprisingly, on MTV, a cable network which in the mid-'90s was just beginning to poke into original, non-music-video programming.

The ultimate island of unfettered experimentation came into being in 1992 when Ted Turner launched the Cartoon Network, a 24-hour cable network filled with nothing but animated programs. In setting up the network, Turner had acquired the entire backlog of Hanna-Barbera cartoons from the 1960s. Network executives hoped these old cartoons would appeal not only to kids, but also to their nostalgic baby- boomer parents who had grown up watching "Yogi Bear" and "Scooby Doo." To fill his airwaves 24-7, Turner also needed to produce his own programming. But with the new network not yet bringing in substantial ad revenues, the programs had to be extremely cheap to produce.

One of Turner's executives at the Cartoon Network, Mike Lazzo, came up with a solution. Lazzo took the old animation cells from one of the forgotten cartoons of the 1960s era (a futuristic action hero program called "Space

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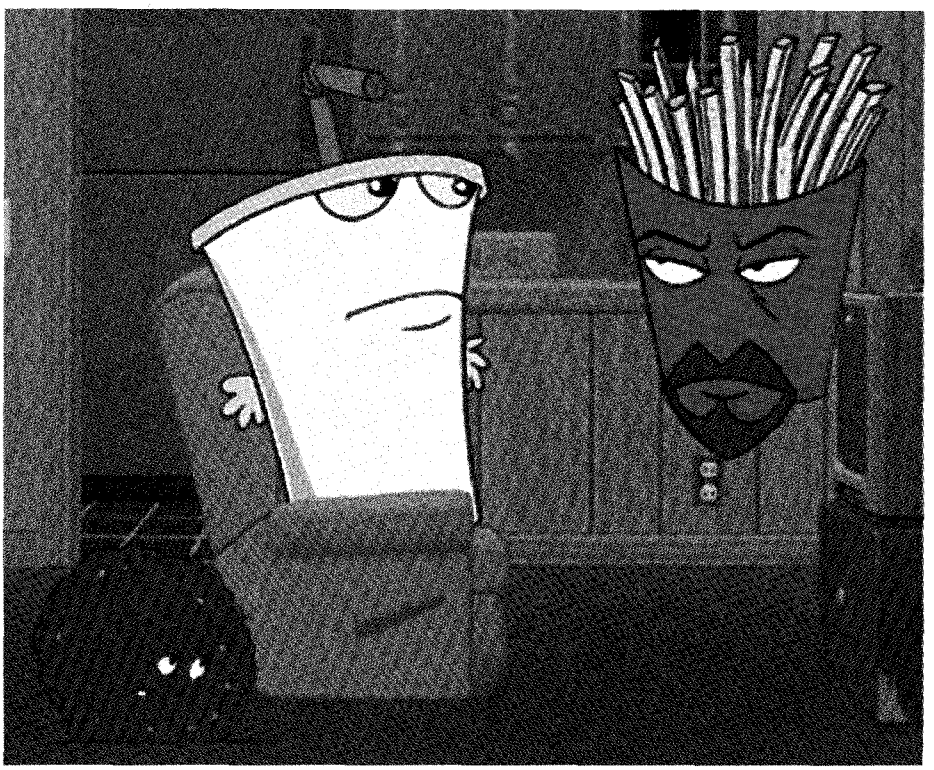

The Adult Swim shows are united by a shared postmodern ethos that plays upon the metaphors and tropes of bad TV. "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" (above) sends up myriad action hero programs, while "Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law" (left) mocks the trial attorney-glorification shows.

Ghost") digitially extracted the drawn characters, grafted them on to a newly drawn background, and added satirical original dialogue to create "Space Ghost Coast to Coast." A campy parody of late-night talk shows, the new cartoon features the vain and stupid Space Ghost character as host, sitting behind a desk clad in white tights, a black mask, and a cape, and Zorak, a rage-filled preying mantis, as his reluctant Doc Severinsen. Space Ghost interviews confused live-action celebrities, mostly either belittling the celebrities' lack of superpowers or bragging about his own. Interviewing "Star Trek"'s William Shatner (whom he calls "Bill Shatman"), Space Ghost proclaims that "outer space shows are for children and stupid people" before abruptly leaving the set to do battle with an air-conditioning repairman. The late-night program was the network's first original production aimed specifically at adults, who liked its satirical, non-sequitur sensibility. The network liked "SGC2C" because it was cheap to produce. And budget constraints meant that the writing had to be extra sharp in order to win viewers over. In its first years on the air, the show developed a cult following among college students and others, even inspiring one of the first TV show-centric Web sites.

After Time-Warner's 1996 merger with the Cartoon Network's corporate parent, Turner Broadcasting, the network began to create more original programs. Most of these shows aired in the daytime and evening hours and were geared to appeal to children, though like the old "Looney Tunes," the best of these new shows—among them "Dexter's Laboratory" and "Powerpuff Girls"—also appealed to parents with their clever dialogue and ironic wit.

But profitably filling the late-night and early-morning hours, when children and working adults were sleeping, was a challenge for the network. And so in 2001, Cartoon Network general manager Jim Samples turned over the most difficult piece of that real estate—Sundays between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m.—to Lazzo to do with as he wished, so long as it cost almost no money. Lazzo hand-picked a group of writers and animators, mostly from the Cartoon Network and Turner, and moved into the Williams Street warehouse. They began seeking out shows that had been dumped by other less successful networks, like UPN's "Home Movies." They then set about creating their own fare, based on the techniques pioneered by "Space Ghost" team. Some, such as "Sealab," reconfigured old Hanna-Barbera series; others such as "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" were based on new images produced extremely cheaply by using new computer animation software, which made coloring, editing, and rendering fast and affordable, virtually eliminating the barriers between the creative mind and the product. New cartoons could now be produced without a large in-house art staff, or without having to outsource the art to some offshore animation powerhouse like Korea.

Finding the "I-don't-give-a-fuck-kids"

Lazzo's team saves money in other ways. Instead of using high-priced actors, the writers themselves do some of the voices; friends of theirs and non-traditional talents supply others—for example, "Sealab" features the voice of left-wing pundit and *Newsday* columnist Ellis Henican as the supremely stupid character Stormy. Instead of shelling out for high-tech pieces with baritone voiceovers for their bumpers—the packaging that runs just before a program is going to start—they used simple white-on-black text in informal dialogues with their audience—telling stories about what went on in the office that week, or featuring pithy quotes from the

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online message boards. When they wanted to promote a specific show, it was done in-house for as cheaply as possible—their promo guy gleefully showed me a typical spot, consisting of white text superimposed over images of jumping flames, bragging that it cost "about $1.99" to make. This sort of pride in spending as little as possible on everything is a common theme at Williams Street. In his disarming Southern drawl, Lazzo explains that at most networks, the enormous costs of producing television shows means that network executives favor safe choices, but, at Adult Swim, "We've designed the system to be inexpensive enough to make risky choices."

"That's one of the things that Mike does, and one of the things that we're glad that he does—he don't give a shit," says "Sealab 2021" co-creator Matt Thompson. "He's like: 'Well, they'll watch it or they won't. Then we'll do something else. If they don't like it, it only cost us 5 dollars to make the damn thing.' He just didn't care, and there's something really cool about that. Because, the audience, all those people? They don't care either. And that's why advertisers have jumped on board and said 'This is where we can sell our cheese!' Because what other block of programming on TV can actually bring you the demographic of the 'I-don't-give-a-fuck' kids?"

Aside from budget-conscious production values, the Adult Swim shows are united by a shared postmodern ethos: ironic detachment and meta-commentary on the metaphors and tropes of bad television. "Space Ghost Coast to Coast" mocks late-night television shows where empty celebrities tell bad jokes and ramble vapidly. "Aqua Teen" sends up myriad interchangeable detective shows and action hero programs by having the signature items of our replaceable culture—a fast food value meal—manifest themselves as a crime-fighting unit that doesn't fight crime at all. "Harvey Birdman" mocks the trial attorney-glorification shows; "Sealab" deconstructs ersatz science and the workplace; even the late, lamented "Brak Show" fractured the Ozzie-and-Harriet style family sitcom with its melange of aliens, robots, and short Brazilian men living together in a parody of nuclear harmony.

Signs of intelligent life

Other networks, noticing the success of Adult Swim, have attempted to usurp its popularity by launching mature-themed programs of their own. Comedy Central jumped into the fray with 2003's "Kid Notorious," a raunchy animated version of the life and times of film producer Robert Evans. Spike TV, which bills itself as "the Network for Men," introduced an animation block called "The Strip" in 2003, featuring shows like "Stripperella," about a crime-fighting exotic dancer, and "Gary the Rat," about a rodent lawyer. But these shows largely fell prey to the same problems that doomed "The Simpsons" imitators in the early '90s, mimicking the format while failing to understand the form. While often beautifully animated, these knock-off shows lack the off-kilter sensibilities that make the Adult Swim programs so delightful. If endless in-jokes about Hollywood and incongruous celebrity name dropping don't make you laugh, then there's no real appeal to "Kid Notorious." And "Stripperella" and "Gary the Rat," while occasionally funny, are so transparent in their attempts to court a specific demographic—those breast-loving, lawyer-hating 18-24-year-old males—that they lose any real appeal they might have. Indeed, "The Strip" was pulled from the air in early 2004, and the only cartoons that are regularly running on Spike TV right now are 2 a.m. airings of classic "Ren and Stimpy" episodes.

So far, then, if the cartoon market is like biological evolution, there's much to cheer about: Competition is killing off the stupid new series, while more complex and intelligent life forms are thriving and further evolving at a breakneck pace, with no immediate end in sight. Indeed, with the aid of new PC-based computer programs like Flash, teenagers of a new generation are devising their own cartoons and passing them around to their friends via the Internet. No golden age lasts forever, but the good news is that with this one, the best may be yet to come. ◆

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Paradise Glossed

The problem with David Brooks.

By Nicholas Confessore

Illustration by Fred Harper

A few weeks ago, as news of the torture at Abu Ghraib made its way out to the wider world, David Brooks published a column that many of his readers had probably been waiting months to see. Brooks, who joined *The New York Times* op-ed stable in 2003, had long been among the more cogent defenders of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But as the prison scandal reached its apogee, Brooks seemed to have had enough. "This has been a crushingly depressing period, especially for people who support the war in Iraq," he wrote. "The predictions people on my side made about the postwar world have not yet come true. The warnings others made about the fractious state of post-Saddam society have." Though he was not ready to give up on Iraq, Brooks continued:

> It's not too early to begin thinking about what was clearly an intellectual failure. There was, above all, a failure to understand the consequences of our power. There was a failure to anticipate the response our power would have on the people we sought to liberate. They resent us for our power and at the same time expect us to be capable of everything. There was a failure to understand the effect our power would have on other people around the world. We were so sure that we were using our might for noble purposes, we assumed that sooner or later, everybody else would see that as well.

Nicholas Confessore is an editor of *The Washington Monthly.*

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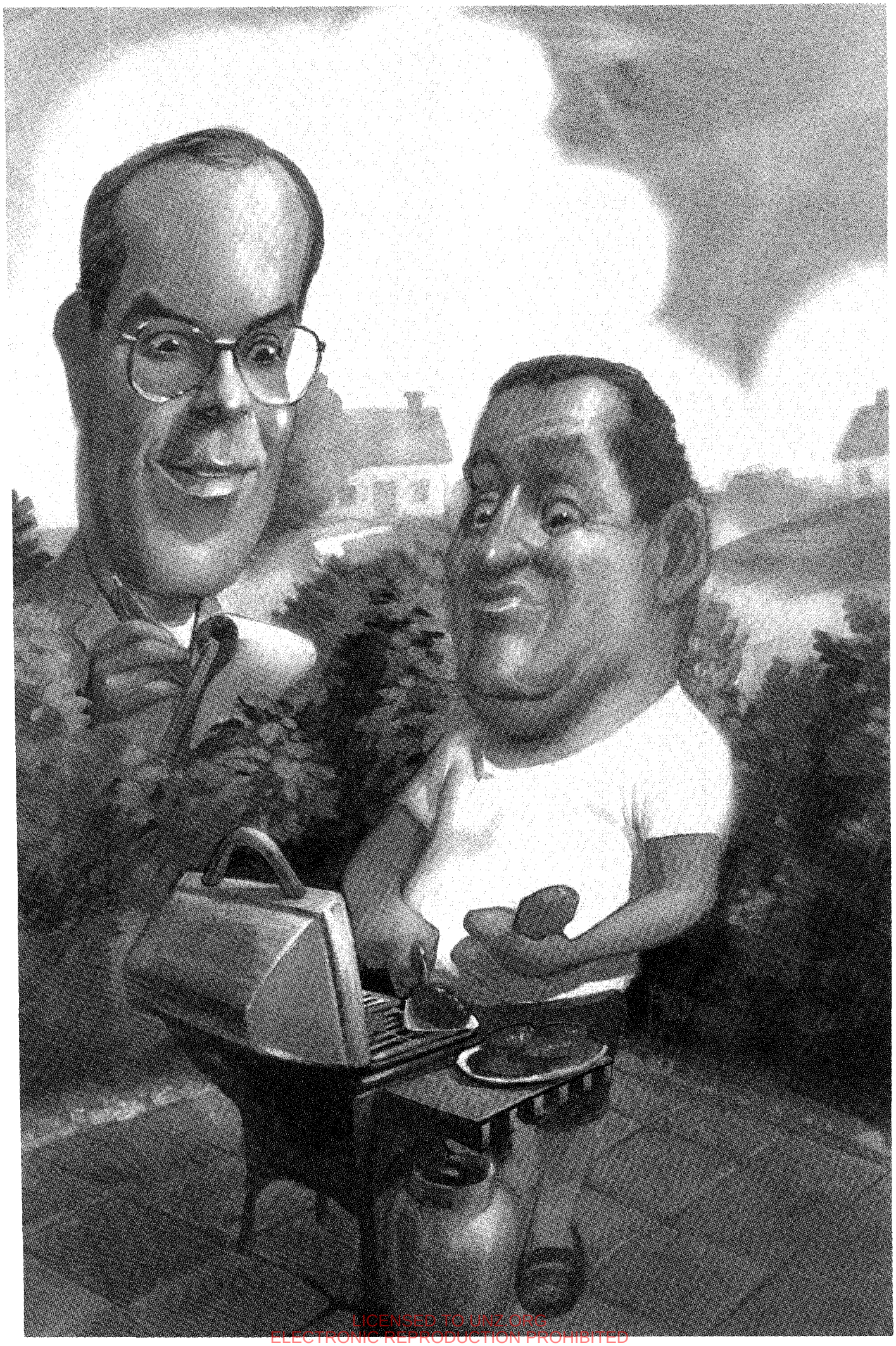

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Not only was Brooks perhaps the first among that group of conservative thinkers who had advocated war against Iraq for nearly a decade to concede that his side had gotten things dreadfully wrong. He had also put his finger on the central failing of the war hawks—their purblind arrogance and self-delusion—with a degree of precision all the more powerful for having come from a supporter of the war.

It's instructive, though, to go back and read what Brooks had written about Iraq one month earlier, when the Shiite uprising began to build steam. "Come on people, let's get a grip," Brooks lectured:

> This week, Chicken Littles like Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd were ranting that Iraq is another Vietnam. Pundits and sages were spinning a whole series of mutually exclusive disaster scenarios: Civil war! A nationwide rebellion!
>
> Maybe we should calm down a bit. I've spent the last few days talking with people who've spent much of their careers studying and working in this region. We're at a perilous moment in Iraqi history, but the situation is not collapsing.

Oh, good—he talked to some people. (The only Near East experts on the planet who didn't think the situation was collapsing, apparently.) Having begun his column like an overzealous junior press secretary ham-handedly spinning bad news, Brooks ended it like a second-rate talk-radio host playing tough guy. "Sadr is an enemy of civilization," he intoned. "The terrorists are enemies of civilization. They must be defeated." Well, sure.

I suspect I'm not the only one who has noticed that the quality of Brooks's *Times* column varies wildly from week to week. One day, he's funny, unpredictable, insightful; you read along, glad that the *Times* has given this man a permanent place in its pages. Three days later, he's bloviating like Michael Savage, and Maureen Dowd doesn't seem so silly anymore. But if you peruse Brooks's considerable pre-*Times*ian oeuvre, you'll find that the same inconsistency is evident throughout his work. There is Brooks the Journalist. And there is Brooks the Hack.

Brooks the Journalist got his start working the police beat in Chicago; today, nearly alone among those conservative pundits who habitually bash the press for its laziness and myopia, Brooks still actually ventures out into the real world to do his own reporting on what it holds. Brooks the Journalist is erudite enough to pen essays for *The Public Interest* but accessible enough to write columns for *Newsweek*. Often when reading his best work, you feel that he's perfectly explained or captured something you knew to be true but couldn't find precisely the right words for. He is a keen observer, adept at distilling his reporting into generalizations that illuminate American life. The most famous of these is, of course, the bohemian bourgeoisie, or Bobos, the upscale, older liberals who "combined the countercultural sixties and the achieving eighties into one social ethos," as Brooks put it in his bestselling book, *Bobos In Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. *Bobos* was a bestseller not only because it captured the mores of middle-aged, blue-state Boomers—people who wear expedition-quality anoraks to shovel snow and spend thousands of dollars on brand-new dinner tables designed to look worn and authentic—but also because he was sympathetic to his subjects. (A wise move, as they were also his audience.) "I'm a member of this class," Brooks assured readers. "We're not so bad."

Indeed, such people enjoy reading Brooks the Journalist precisely because he is one of the few right-leaning pundits who doesn't seem to believe that liberals are evil. Though conservative, Brooks the Journalist is reflective rather than bombastic; his zingers barely singe, let alone burn. Instead of dispensing wrath on "Hannity & Colmes," Brooks offers witty aperçus on "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer." Even the political philosophy to which Brooks has attached his name, "national-greatness conservatism"—it has something to do with building nicer libraries and resuscitating the space program—seems rather unthreatening. To put things in Brooksian terms, he's a conservative, but the kind you'd bring home to discuss politics over $17-a-pound artisanal goat cheese and organic chardonnay bottled by third-generation French peasants. It's no wonder the *Times* felt comfortable putting him on the op-ed page.

But there is also Brooks the Hack. Brooks the Hack spent his formative years at *The Wall Street Journal*'s famously kooky and fact-challenged editorial page, for which he wrote "editorial features," the *Journal*'s term for axe-grinding reportage that sidesteps the paper's famously demanding news pages and, indeed, frequently contradicts what is published there. (Though Brooks's dispatches, to be sure, ground much less than those of his colleagues.) Later, he helped launch *The Weekly Standard*, which played house organ to the Gingrich revolution in the days before it played house organ to the Bush administration hawks. (In between these periods, the *Standard* was perhaps the most trenchant and interesting political magazine in the country.) While Brooks the Journalist is honest and self-critical, Brooks the Hack is willing to

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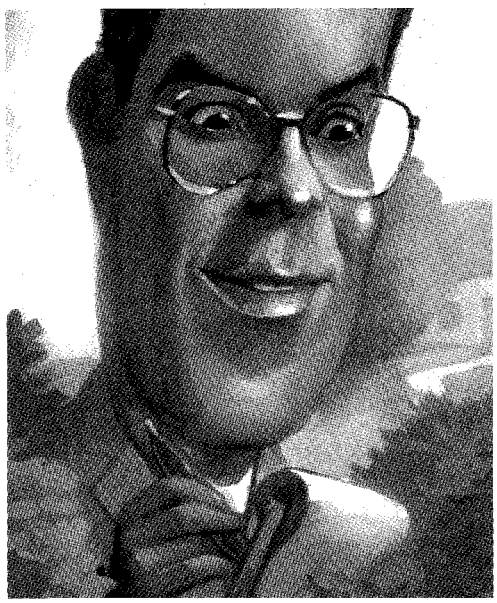
carry water for his political allies. He opines that the Bush administration is "drunk on truth serum" and "exceptionally forthright" about its policies. He unsheathes the marvelous sophistry that "our government couldn't even come up with a plan for postwar Iraq—thank goodness, too, because any 'plan' hatched by technocrats in Washington would have been unfit for Iraqi reality." (Actually, technocrats at Departments of Defense and State did hatch a pretty good plan. Alas, Brooks's fellow-travelers among the Pentagon's civilian appointees ignored it.) He insists that pro-war neoconservatives "travel in widely different circles and don't actually have much contact with one another," when in fact a game of "Two Degrees of Richard Perle" would get you just about every member of this alleged neocon diaspora.

Similarly, Brooks the Hack indulges in predictable—and frequently dishonest—caricatures of Democrats. He once wrote that "upscale areas everywhere" voted for Al Gore, even though a cursory check of census data reveals that seven of the 10 richest counties in America voted for George W. Bush in 2000. When it began to look like John Kerry would carry the Democratic banner in 2004, Brooks argued that the Democrats "won't nominate a guy unless his family had an upper-deck berth on the Mayflower"—this of a party whose last five nominees included a Georgia peanut farmer, a guy raised by a working-class single mom in Arkansas, and another born to Greek immigrants. Yet Brooks the Hack seems to revel in cheap shots, such as implying that the term "neocon" was anti-Semitic— "con is short for 'conservative' and neo is short for 'Jewish'," he recently wrote in the *Times*.



Where Brooks the Journalist unfurls grand abstractions that illuminate essential truths about American life, Brooks the Hack peddles unreliable generalizations that describe the world as he and his friends wish it to be.

More broadly, whereas Brooks the Journalist unfurls grand abstractions that illuminate essential truths about American life, Brooks the Hack peddles unreliable generalizations that describe the world as he and his friends wish it to be. Every pundit makes bad calls during election season, but only Brooks was of the opinion that "[t]he closest thing to a Dean resistance movement is emerging inside the Lieberman campaign," as he wrote in December 2003, when the steadfastly pro-war senator was parked in a race for fifth. When Brooks set out to describe the differences between red and blue America—by driving a whopping 65 miles from Bethesda, Md., to Franklin County, Pa.—he produced an article replete with seemingly knowing observations that turned out to be factually wrong. Brooks says few blue staters "could name even five NASCAR drivers"; but as reporter Sasha Issenberg noted in *Philadelphia Magazine*, three of the five top markets for the Winston Cup are in blue states. Brooks says that red America is home-shopping country, but it turns out that QVC's audiences skew towards affluent, suburban blue staters. Brooks says you can't spend more than $20 at a restaurant in Franklin County, when in fact it's possible to blow $50 on veal medallions and wild-rice pilaf at a bed-and-breakfast where Brooks himself had spent the night.

Split personality

Brooks the Journalist and Brooks the Hack are both on display in his new book, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*. Like *Bobos*, it is a work of cultural reporting, with Brooks in the role of "comic sociologist." But whereas *Bobos* limned the mostly liberal, mostly blue state-dwelling upper middle-class, *On Paradise Drive* is concerned with a lower social register and a broader geographic swath—the "moderately affluent strivers" whose peregrinations have made suburbia the demographic center of American life. Today, more people live, work, and play in the 'burbs than in urban or rural locales. And as Brooks is not the first to note, the new suburbs are also very different from the old ones. Taken as a whole, for instance, they contain more single people than families with kids. They have replaced cities as the first destination of immigrants, most of whom now skip Chinatown and move directly to the outskirts of places like Charlotte, N.C., and Lincoln, Neb.

What's more, Brooks argues, these suburbs are not the boring and conformist cul-de-sacs of popular repute, but places where venerable and vibrant American traditions have taken root and flourished. "The human longing for transcendence, spiritual depth, and moral cohesion has not perished in the sprawls of suburbia," he writes, "it has just taken a different form, because so many Americans live so much of their lives in the imagined land of the future." It is in the new suburbs—with

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their limitless physical, social, and political space—that the American penchant for decentralization and segmentation has come to full flower. In suburbia, every subculture has its geographic enclave, every niche sport a championship broadcast on ESPN 2, every hobby its own clubs, conventions, and celebrities. Hence, the 'burbs are home to white people, but also to a pastiche of American cultural, religious, and lifestyle diversity: "lesbian dentists, Iranian McMansions, Korean megachurches, nuclear-free-zone subdevelopments, Orthodox shtetls with Hasidic families walking past strip malls on their way to Saturday-morning shul," as Brooks puts it. And thanks to the job mobility of the post-industrial economy, people who don't like where they live or who they live next to can simply move somewhere else, which Americans do more than any other people in the world.

This is good observational journalism, grounded in (other people's) social-science research. But then there are those abstractions. For a book about America, *On Paradise Drive* has very few Americans in it. For the most part, as Brooks explains early on, he prefers "to speak in parables, composites, and archetypes." And there are a lot of them, some of which will be familiar to readers of Brooks's magazine writing. There is the Ubermom, the high-achieving woman who, upon leaving the workforce for motherhood, channels her intelligence and drive into unleashing the potential for greatness possessed by each of her children. ("By the time her child is in the pre-preschool years, Ubermom is boosting her junior achiever's prephonics-acquisition skills.") There is the Organization Kid, the dutiful meritocrat who spends high school amassing "extracurriculars" and his college years trying to climb the system instead of bucking it. "One finds students applying time-quadrant techniques to maximize their mental efficiency. They read *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*," he writes. "Opportunity lures them, the glorious future." Others of Brooks's composite characters lack cutesy names but are endowed with fully-realized inner lives. In an amusing section about niche magazines, Brooks describes "the perfect *Cigar Aficionado* reader" as someone who sips 400-year-old port, watches James Bond DVDs, and "contemplates whether it is really worth it to travel to Russia just so he can break the sound barrier in a rented MiG, or whether his time would be better spent at the Dean Martin fantasy camp for frustrated crooners."

It's easy to find yourself nodding along with *On Paradise Drive*, in part because Brooks is a very funny writer and in part because his composites are often wickedly acute. (I still remember playing tennis against other Organization Kids whose MBA-holding Ubermoms firmly believed they could turn little Billy into the next Andre Agassi.) I'm even willing to accept that sometimes, "One simply must tolerate imprecision of the poetic if one is to grasp the true or powerful essence of a place or people," as Brooks argues in his introduction. Ambitious journalism is perforce the work of translating on-the-ground facts into big ideas with universal import.

But it's hard work, and one is liable, if not relentlessly honest with oneself, to slight a nuanced truth in favor of a pet theory. Just ask any reporter who's ever been told to find subjects for a story on, say, what Soccer Moms are thinking these days. In practice, if you ask 10 different Soccer Moms what their opinion is of George W. Bush, you're likely to get 10 different answers. The temptation is to pick the Soccer Mom who's thinking what everyone in New York and Washington expects her to be thinking—or what the polls say she *should* be thinking. Or to ask a local advocacy group to provide you with just the right homeless guy you need to illustrate your story on cuts in social services budget. Or to use the same "man on the street" your buddy on the metro desk used last month, hoping readers won't notice that Fred O'Keefe of Flushing has remarkably quotable views on both the city's budget crisis and "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?"

Some reporters, of course, don't even bother. Fabulists such as Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, and Jack Kelley each ran aground on the rocks of reality, so desperate to find telling anecdotes or characters or details that they simply invented them.

Schtick figures

Brooks could never be called a fabulist, if for no other reason that he sidesteps the problem altogether by writing about archetypes instead of real people. But there's evidence in *On Paradise Drive* of tension between the abstractions Brooks the Hack wants to be true and the reality Brooks the Reporter should have gotten right.

Take, for example, the suburban typology that occupies the early part of the book. You don't have to read too closely to figure out that, in Brooks's estimation, some suburbs are better expressions of the new American dream than others. On the one hand, you have the exurbs, the land of office parks, megastores, and sprawling housing developments plopped into the middle of Southwestern deserts and Florida swampland. Brooks evidently likes the exurbs. They are, he writes, "built to embody a modern version of the suburban ideal." The exurbs are populated by "Patio Man" and "Realtor Mom," people who are "infused with a sense of what you might call conservative utopianism." They live in new urbanist planned communities with sculpted driveways and perfect landscaping. They are self-effacing and pleasant. They like paninis and chain stores and golf. They moved to the exurbs because they want bigger houses, nicer neighbors, and lower crime—and also because, Brooks tells us, they are uncomfortable in the increasingly cosmopolitan inner-ring suburbs, with their immigrant group-housing and foreign-film festivals. Patio Man and Realtor Mom vote overwhelmingly Republican. "They are," Brooks writes, "wonderful people."

Rather less wonderful—at least in Brooks's telling—are those who live on the other side of the Beltway. Though he likes to decry clichés about suburban life, here's how he describes a typical resident of the more liberal inner-ring communities:

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> The assistant anthropology professor can stride through life knowing she was unanimously elected chairwoman of her crunchy suburb's sustainable-growth seminar. She wears the locally approved status symbols: the Tibet-motif dangly earrings, the Andrea Dworkin-inspired hairstyle, the peasant blouse, and the public-broadcasting tote bag . . . No wonder she feels so righteous in her beliefs.

Why not just call her a screechy dyke and be done with it? But that's not all. These crunchy suburbanites, Brooks alleges, "subtly compete to prove they have the worst lawn in the neighborhood, just to show how fervently they reject soul-destroying standards of conventional success." They don't paint their houses enough because they regard "exterior housepaint in the same way they regard makeup, as something that was probably developed using animal testing." In these places, "the chief dilemma is whether to send the kids to Antioch or Hampshire College." And so forth. These are not wonderful people. These are character sketches for a *Dartmouth Review* cartoon.

It is true that Brooks's conservatism leads him to smart ideas that a more liberal columnist probably wouldn't conceive. But it's also true that his hankering after movement cred accounts for most of what is dishonest and sloppy in his ideas.

Then we get to the professional zones, filled with "affluent sophisticated types who disapprove of the suburbs in principle but find themselves living in one in practice." Here, he insists, "it is apparently socially acceptable to buy a luxury car so long as it comes from a country that is hostile to U.S. foreign policy." This is funny at first, and then I wondered whether Brooks actually met a single person who bought their Audi because Germany declined to join the coalition of the willing. I doubt it. (What car does Brooks drive, anyway?) Of Trader Joe's, the chain of low-priced gourmet grocery stores beloved by liberal suburbanites, Brooks writes, "Everyone knows that snack food is morally suspect, since it contributes to the obesity of the American public, but the clientele still seems to want it. So the folks behind this enterprise have managed to come up with globally concerned stomach filler that tastes virtually like sawdust ground from unendangered wood." Give me a break. Even liberals don't usually buy food that they think tastes bad, and if you look closely at the allegedly goody-goody foods that Brooks cites, you'll find that Veggie Booty and wasabi peas are not very good for you. That is why they are called junk food.

But Brooks believes that even the eating habits of liberal suburbanites are shallow and hypocritical. "When you stumble across Teriyaki Fajita Salad du Jardin, you realize it is possible to cram so many authentic indigenous cultures together that they've created something totally bogus and artificial," he writes. Not only that, but the professionals and the crunchies are provincial and out-of-touch compared to other people. They "don't know what makes a Pentecostal a Pentecostal," "can't tell a military officer's rank by looking at the insignia," and "don't know what a soybean looks like growing in the field." Brooks is probably right on all counts. But then again, I would guess that nearly every American who is not a Pentecostal doesn't know what makes a Pentecostal a Pentecostal. (Quick, what distinguishes a Catholic from an Episcopalian?) And I would love to see polling data on how many Americans, in this age of industrialized agribusiness, know what a soybean looks like growing in the field.

The point is that too often, Brooks's "archetypes" are really just old-fashioned stereotypes. It should go without saying that most people are more complicated and contradictory than stereotypes allow for. I doubt Patio Men, if they exist, are all wonderful people, but I also don't think they would turn out to be any more or less wonderful than any other group of people in America. The inner-ring suburbs, too, are rather more varied than Brooks's caricature allows. Montgomery County, Md., where Brooks lives, does have its Takoma Park neighborhood, which I strongly suspect was the model for Brooks's archetypal "crunchy suburb." But it has lots of other parts, too: upper-crust Chevy Chase, young professionals living in Silver Spring because the apartments are cheaper there than in the District, the strip-mall row of Rockville Pike, and so forth. Takoma Park is not typical of Montgomery County, but the thing is, there really is no typical Montgomery County. Average things out that way, and you only blur the reality.

Maul of America

There's some indication that even Brooks himself doesn't think much of his suburban typology. Patio Man and Realtor Mom originally made their appearance in a *Weekly Standard* article published shortly before the 2002 elec-

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tions. That time around, Brooks elevated them to the heart of a much broader thesis. They "represent the beau ideal of Republican selfhood," he wrote in the *Standard*, "and are becoming the new base—the brains, heart, guts and soul of the emerging Republican party." Driven out of the inner-ring suburbs by snooty latté-sipping cosmopolitans, they were moving to the new suburbs, places like Loudoun County, Va. and Douglas County, Colo. As Brooks elaborated later in an article for *Blueprint*, the house journal of the Democratic Leadership Council:

> With the explosion of office park people and institutions, a new culture is emerging. And people who are part of that culture tend to adopt the values of George W. Bush, regardless of the values they had in their old towns. These include order and neatness over disorder and dysfunction; achievement, sports, and competition; and a sense of responsibility and success. It's a jock culture filled with talk of college football, NASCAR, and kids' sports teams that travel. It's a culture in which seeker-sensitive mega-churches are part of the atmosphere, even if you never set foot in one. It's a culture of big-box mega-malls with parking lots as big as nuclear test sites where sprawl people gather to brag about how much they're saving by buying in bulk.

The coming political era, Brooks posited, was one of suburb v. suburb, with the Sprawl People of exurbia duking it out for dominance with the crunchies, immigrants, and professionals of the Democratic-leaning inner-ring suburbs. Because the exurbs were growing faster than the latter, and because they were pretty good at incorporating new arrivals into their orderly center-right political culture, they would win.

But like some of Brooks's other abstractions, this one just didn't hold up under close inspection. The exurbs have certainly grown faster than the inner-ring suburbs. But as political demographer Ruy Teixeira has pointed out in this magazine ("Deciphering the Democrats' Debacle," May 2003) since the former were so small to begin with, the latter are still growing much faster in absolute terms. More tellingly, as the exurbs get bigger—as they become more prosperous, get integrated into the larger metropolitan areas Teixeira calls "ideopolises," and attract more immigration—they actually tend to get more cosmopolitan and Democratic. That's why, among counties with the largest total population growth, Al Gore won nearly 3 million more votes than George W. Bush. Loudoun County may have given Bush 56 percent of the vote in 2000, but the same county gave his dad 66 percent in 1988. (Reflecting the emergence of a Democratic ideopolis, Virginia's northern suburbs have gone from overwhelmingly Republican a few decades ago to evenly split now, helping put a Democrat back in the governor's mansion.) Other states with sprawl—among them Nevada, Arizona, and Colorado—are becoming more blue, not more red.

That may be why Brooks neglects to include his theory of future Republican dominance among the pages *On Paradise Drive*, which is, on the whole, not a very political book. Indeed, he pretty much drops his original typology after the first few chapters, implicitly acknowledging that it wasn't very useful in the first place, and the heart of his analysis—the chapters about how Ubermom and her Organization Kid shop and live and learn—doesn't rely much on the peculiarities of the crunchy suburbs or the glories of the exurbs. By the end of the book, Brooks is much more interested in what suburbanites have in common: the "Paradise Spell" that drives our tendency to "work so hard, to consume so feverishly, to move so much." Ultimately, it's the same longing, the same desire for opportunity, success, and fulfillment, that drive both the exurban Patio Man with his military-grade Weber grill and the suburban lawyer who rips apart his kitchen to make room for a Tuscan-style culinary operations center. This is what Brooks means by living "in the future tense." And here you sense that—once again—Brooks has put his finger on something. As a friend of mine once put it, there's no Canadian Dream. But there is an American Dream, and everyone in the world knows what it is. We are the eschatological nation.

Of course, this line of thinking is neither particularly new—see Frederick Jackson Turner's enormously influential thesis, articulated slightly more than a century ago, about the effect of a permanent frontier on American culture—nor particularly conservative. Not too long ago, in his speech accepting the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination, Bill Clinton reminisced about what he had learned at Georgetown from the historian Carroll Quigley: that "America was the greatest country in the history of the world because our people have always believed in two great ideas: first, that tomorrow can be better than today, and second that each of us has a personal, moral responsibility to make it so." It was a motif Clinton would come back to repeatedly during his two campaigns for the presidency—he won the suburban vote both times—and during his time in the White House. Brooks may believe that Clinton "debased the presidency and disillusioned a generation of young people," as he wrote a few years ago. But he shares with the former president a surprisingly similar sense of the essential fabric of American life.

Brooks the Journalist seems to, at any rate. But Brooks the Hack still desires to be part of a wider political movement, even one that commands embarrassing displays of intellectual obedience. And while most of *On Paradise Drive* is written by Brooks the Journalist, Brooks the Hack still lurks within, always threatening to overcome his better half, always clouding his vision and throwing off his aim. It's true that Brooks's conservatism leads him to smart ideas that a more liberal columnist probably wouldn't conceive. But it's also true that his hankering after movement cred accounts for most of what is dishonest and sloppy in his ideas. Eventually, Brooks will have to decide exactly who he wants to be. ◆

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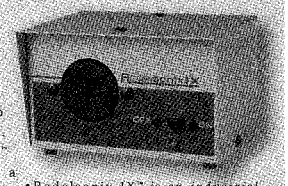

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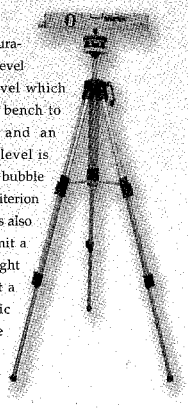

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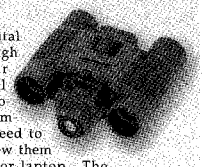

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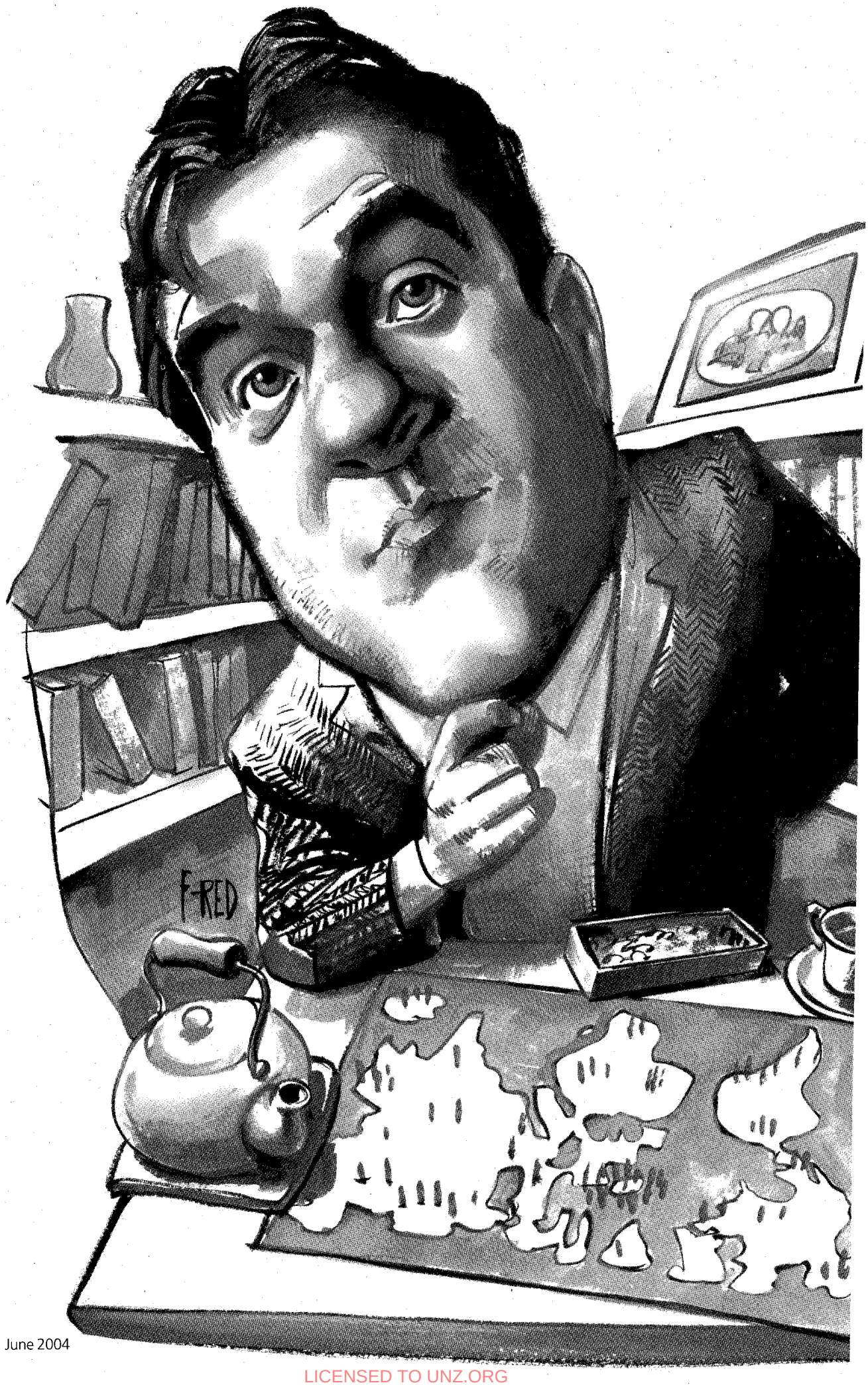

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Right Man's Burden

Why empire enthusiast Niall Ferguson won't change his mind.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

Illustration by Fred Harper

In early May, Niall Ferguson, the celebrity Scottish historian, looked out at a packed house seething with antagonism. He had come to Washington to deliver a talk at the Council on Foreign Relations defending his idea that the war in Iraq had not only been the right thing to do, but also ought to be the first step towards a wide-ranging American empire. It would be difficult to imagine a moment when the capital's bipartisan policy elite —Ferguson's audience—were less inclined to be receptive to his ideas. The first accounts of the torture at Abu Ghraib had just appeared, and the cause in Iraq was beginning to look more hopeless than ever. And the crowd had come to see someone *answer* for all of this, to see how Ferguson, whose ideas had help get us into the war, would defend himself. Ferguson didn't defend himself. He attacked.

Benjamin Wallace-Wells is an editor of *The Washington Monthly.*

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Within three minutes he'd lost the liberals in the crowd, arguing, improbably that the problems in Iraq proved that America ought to be more of an empire, not less of one. A bald-headed scholar from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asked him whether the United States ought to be morally willing to slay thousands of Iraqis to stabilize Iraq. Ferguson retorted, "Perhaps you would wish Saddam back in power; that's the implication of what you're saying." The liberal think-tankers around me started guffawing openly, and shooting each other is-this-guy-for-real smirks.

With one leg crossed over the other, his hands folded in his lap, his pale face issuing a dispassionate monotone, Ferguson pressed on. Not only were the problems in Iraq the direct fault of America's unwillingness to call itself an empire, he said, but they were also predictable. "In behaving the way they did," Ferguson said, "those soldiers and military policemen [at Abu Ghraib] were largely doing to their prisoners what routinely people in the American military do to new recruits."

This was too much for even the conservatives in the audience. The guffaws grew louder, the muttered protests reached the front of the room. In the row in front of me, a broad-shouldered, uniformed officer stood up. "Big disagree here, sir," he bellowed. "Big disagree with your characterization." (Fleetingly, I wondered if this was how colonels address one another in private). "The institution I have spent my life in abhors what went on in Iraq," he said. "It's not the way we treat anyone— a fresh recruit or a plebe at West Point." The crowd clapped vigorously. In less than ten minutes, Ferguson had pulled off that rarest of Washington double plays, alienating liberals and conservatives alike.

Ferguson didn't flinch. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. "But you have to recognize that power will corrupt inevitably. It comes with the territory of empire." Transgressions like this, Ferguson said, were common to "all imperial armies."

The colonel stood there for a second, not knowing quite what to say. Eventually, he sat down. Ferguson hadn't quite satisfied the crowd, but he had displayed a mastery of just enough history to disarm them. The audience grumbled at Ferguson throughout the question-and-answer session, but no one really challenged him again. As the panel ended, they clapped grudgingly and then shuffled out of the room, vaguely dissatisfied. Ferguson had replicated his role from the lead-up to the war: In a moment of profound, and deeply felt, confusion at what our national direction ought to be, Ferguson offered extreme certainty. And his claims caught on when no one was able to make a counter-argument with such confidence and clarity.

Ferguson is, at just over 40 and a few months short of a scheduled appointment to a history professorship at Harvard, indisputably one of the world's most famous and influential historians—he was recently named one of the planet's 100 Most Influential People by *Time*, beating out Tony Blair. His influence comes from his dramatic, sweeping intellectual style, whose theme is, more or less, "Everything you thought you knew about history is wrong." Ferguson's genius is for counter-conventional thinking, urging radical reinterpretations of topics that everyone else had pretty much considered settled. Ferguson is out of sync with the academy in style, politics, and manner, but he has been a useful intellectual prod, the appeal of his radical theories forcing mainstream academics to refine their own thinking. Read Ferguson for any real stretch of time, and you begin to imagine what it might have been like had Andrew Sullivan chosen as his topic the entire breadth of human history.

It is unpleasant, if compelling in a train-wreck kind of way, to watch what can happen when such a dynamic mind veers dramatically off-track; he can take a lot of people crashing into an intellectual ditch with him. After September 11, Ferguson provided much of the theoretical ballast for a group of British-inflected thinkers—among them Max Boot and Marc Steyn—who urged empire on a newly expansionist American regime, acting as a transatlantic goad, the collective ghost of pith helmets past. Ferguson himself used the issue to edge into popular history; he produced and hosted a six-part program about the British empire on England's Channel Four which even London's liberal *Guardian*, after a great deal of public radio-style hand-wringing, credited with changing the national conversation about the empire. Perhaps more than anyone else, Ferguson was responsible for inserting the notion of a formal American empire into the public debate. Professors of imperial history around America started turning to his texts. Washington hawks from Richard Perle to Dinesh D'Souza to Bill Kristol drew on Ferguson's ideas and arguments to help make the case not only for the war in Iraq but also for a revolutionary, if vaguely articulated, new role for America in the world. Within two

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weeks of arriving in the United States in the fall of 2002, to take up a teaching post at New York University, Ferguson had been summoned to Washington twice, once each by the Departments of Treasury and State, where he explained his convictions to policymakers; in Foggy Bottom, he met with Colin Powell—rarified company for a young historian.

In recent months as the invasion of Iraq has bogged down into a tough and bloody fight, Ferguson's intellectual fellow-travelers have scrambled to find the high ground. Several, like Richard Perle, continue to maintain against all evidence that things are going fine. Others, such as William Kristol, admit the failures but insist things might have worked out better had the administration put in more troops. A few, such as Fouad Ajami and David Brooks, have essentially conceded that our plans to impose an imperial order on Iraq were flawed from the beginning.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Niall Ferguson was responsible for inserting the notion of a formal American empire into the public debate. Washington hawks from Richard Perle to Bill Kristol drew on Ferguson's ideas to help make the case for a new role for America in the world.

In his just published book, *Colossus*, Ferguson puts forth his own defense. He fully admits how poorly the American mission in Iraq has gone but says this only proves his ultimate point. Had President Bush been willing to see the United States' role in the world as essentially imperial, Ferguson argues, he would have understood the depth of commitment, the hundreds of thousands of troops and tens of thousands of civil administrators, needed to really turn Iraq into a democracy. The failures in Iraq don't, for Ferguson, mean that the project of American empire was deeply misguided; rather, they affirm that an imperial attitude is the only one that might have done the job in Iraq.

This is quintessential Ferguson thinking—altogether new, seductive, but also almost entirely speculative. Ferguson knows just enough about empire and America to make an argument which is on its face convincing, but not nearly enough to be right. The attempt at empire-building he pushed America towards in Iraq is clearly failing. But rather than question his own thinking, he now argues that a bigger, better version of American empire would have worked and still could. In this, he resembles the American Communist Party of mid-century: The problem with Stalin's Soviets, they said, was that they weren't Communist *enough*.

Loving the unfashionable

I first met Niall Ferguson just after noon on what was New York's very-late-arriving first day of Spring, and the sun made him cheery, proposing a toast to the weather. We met at a French bistro with a bright-blue painted street-front, cranky waiters, and, for two hours at what ought to have been the lunch rush's peak, only one or two other patrons. Ferguson said the place was a fave; in his culinary choices as in his intellectual ones, he seeks out sparsely populated venues. "I love this place because it's *unfashionable*," he told me, leaning and giving a happy half-sneer. "In New York, the herds are worse than in London, stampeding into restaurants just because it's fashionable. Nobody comes to this place. You can actually hear yourself *think*."

Ferguson has sandy, undergraduate-looking hair and a long nose and a mouth that mostly hangs open, as if waiting to pounce. He is funny and charming and self-effacing in that cocky, Hugh Grant way that tells you that all kidding aside, he knows that he doesn't have much to be humble about. And, as public intellectuals go, he doesn't. Besides his joint teaching appointments at NYU and Jesus College, Oxford, he is engaged simultaneously in a book project rethinking World War II, an adaptation for television of *Colossus*, a biography of the influential banker Seymour Warburg, and a popular study of the likely impact of demographics on world financial markets.

He's consequently full of fascinating statistics and anecdotes, such as "by 2050, according to the United Nations, Yemen will have more people than Russia," which even for a professional polymath is a terrific nugget. But his casual interests go even further afield: As I drove to meet him, with good music in short supply, I turned on New York's public radio station and heard a theatrical, learned Scots voice going back and forth with a caller named Paresh from Clifton, N.J. who was muttering darkly about the threats a Muslim majority would pose to the public education system. Paresh's antagonist sure *sounded* like Ferguson, but I couldn't for the life of me figure how a financial historian with a side-

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line in empire had ended up in such a forum. It turned out it was, in fact, Ferguson; he'd written a story for *The New York Times*' Sunday magazine that week about the growing Muslim population of Europe and was just finishing up a radio interview about it before meeting me for lunch.

"I know, I know," Ferguson said, grinning devilishly, "what am I going to write about next, the history of the solar system?"

Talk to Ferguson long enough about America, and you get the distinct sense that he sees himself as Margaret Thatcher to the punditry class's George H.W. Bush, imploring it not to go all wobbly. Ferguson seems to see his role as pushing America towards the realization that only by ridding itself of its isolationist and politically correct tendencies, and having the confidence of its moral convictions, can it save the world by occupying it.

In this, Ferguson is not unlike many of the leading figures in the Bush administration, hard-minded conservatives who prides themselves on seeing things more clearly than others can. It is not an uncommon sensibility among smart conservative thinkers, who mostly come out of the academy, with its decidedly liberal cast, and in many cases come to see themselves as figures of deep intellectual honesty, who can see through orthodox thought and skewer conventional thinking.

This brand of honesty is seductive and in many ways needed, helping us see through calcified thinking and can reveal hidden truths. But it also contains its own pathologies: The tendency to distrust the evidence and arguments of others, and an inclination to follow one's own theory to bewildering, and sometimes damaging, logical extremes.

Empire state building

There are a few American intellectuals who, half-way through their careers, stumble on to the level of ubiquity that Ferguson has now achieved, writing so much about such a wide variety of historical topics that they are no longer relying on any particular expertise but try to get by simply on reading the same things everyone else reads, but reading them *better*, a kind of scholarship of *The New York Times*. But England, which anoints its geniuses at age 22 rather than 42, seems to produce this type somewhat more regularly: Along with Ferguson, think of the theater critic Kenneth Tynan or the historian Simon Schama, who was hired as a Cambridge don on the strength of his undergraduate thesis. Like Schama, Ferguson writes what he calls a "young man's history," sweeping in scope, bold in theory, with little archival work but a lot of argumentative force. The similarity of style between these two famed historians is perhaps not entirely coincidental. It is hard to imagine that those tapped as geniuses at a young age, and called brilliant their whole adult lives, don't have a greater tendency to think that they are smarter than the rest of the academic gang, and with only a brief stretch of intensive thinking, can master topics they had not previously paid attention to, and discover profound new truths. This is, at the very least, a sensibility which has recently driven Ferguson's career.

Ferguson, who started his career as a lauded historian of German financial systems, has since written three major books—*The House of Rothschild* (1998), *The Pity of War* (1999), and *Empire* (2002). The first is by far the best. It is a magnificently well-told story of perhaps the most powerful non-governmental family in history, a story propelled by the argument that the bond market, as much as any other institution, predicted and shaped the rise and fall of European empires.

It is a compelling, exhaustively researched and completely novel point—and *The House of Rothschild* remains Ferguson's only major work to have received prizes and wide acclaim from other historians. Research restrains sweeping, absolute claims: *Rothschild* is the last book Ferguson wrote for which he did original archival work, and his detailed knowledge of his subject meant that his arguments for it couldn't be too grand. His claims about the importance of the bond market didn't extend to arguing that the advances in British war financing were more important than Nelson's facility with ships or Wellington's ability to marshal troops in defeating Napoleon.

Rothschild anointed Ferguson the hot young historian of the moment, his books begetting sprawling response essays in *The New York Review of Books*. For an encore, he turned out *The Pity of War*, a book written entirely from secondary sources. Like *Rothschild*, *Pity* has a bold argument: that the English entry into World War I turned a contained, regional spat that would likely have ended quickly into something that took four years and hundreds of thousands of lives. Ferguson's nimble descriptive talents were on display (his devastating reconstructions of the horrors of battle are among the best I've ever read), as was his facility for the attention-grabbing stat (it cost the Germans just $5,000 to kill an allied soldier; the much wealthier allies, meanwhile, spent $16,000 for each slaughtered Teuton).

But what was most seductive about the bestselling *Pity* was its ambition. I was an undergraduate history major when the book appeared, and having spent four years slogging through the work of American academic micro-historians, confined to writing the definitive history of World War I cemeteries in New England, or the experience of the 2nd Massachusetts militia in the revolutionary war, Ferguson felt urgent and crucial: By the end of the term, my three roommates and I owned four copies of *Pity* between us.

The popular press shared our enthusiasm. Alan Riding of *The New York Times* called Ferguson "the greatest British historian of his generation." Some academics, on the other hand, though wowed by his writing and syn-

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thetic ability (five complex years of world history combined into one linear argument!), charged him with intellectual overstretch—with underestimating, among other things, the role of the French. Even if the English had stayed out of the war, Ferguson's critics argued, the French would have been sucked into it, and the resulting fight would not have been all that much less severe than World War I in fact ended up being. (Ferguson told me that he hopes to address the role of the French more thoroughly in the book's forthcoming second edition.)

With *Empire*, a breezy, optimistic history of the British empire accompanied by a vociferous essay urging the United States to colonize the world in order to guarantee security, free trade, and development, this tendency went pathological. *Empire*, which was designed as a companion to a six-part series on Channel Four which Ferguson also executive produced, looks and reads like a coffee-table book, with no footnotes, great photos and a lively text which focuses heavily on biographical sketches of key imperial figures.

Ferguson is not unlike many of the leading figures in the Bush administration—hard-minded conservatives who pride themselves on a belief that they can see things more clearly than others can.

But it also has a defining and forceful argument. Though England's imperial tentacles may have begun as a series of commercial relationships, Ferguson argues, it was formalized when the government in London realized that to guarantee the security of the nation's investment in overseas commerce, it would have to take direct physical control of countries overseas. This direct control, which effectively guaranteed the security of investments in everything from railroads to factories, permitted an unprecedented and unrepeated flow of capital from the First to the Third World.

Ferguson had set out to tweak conventional thinking. He told me that he had written his history partly in reaction to endless, "stultifying theories of other," an out-of-touch historical community that has condemned the British empire as an abhorrent exercise in racism and sexual exploitation, too. And certainly, the lefty theorists who have discussed the empire this way have had some purchase on the scholarly debate recently.

But the academic consensus isn't nearly as ridiculous as its loudest and brashest voices. The weight of scholarship has said that the British empire did both good and bad. It left good railroads and sound legal systems, and, if you had to be ruled by some European colonial power, the British were a good deal gentler and more liberal than the Portuguese, Spanish, or Belgians. But on balance, the scholarly consensus more or less goes, it's hard to make the case that the overall effect was positive: Natives were denied any real political rights and subjected not only to often oppressive rule by foreigners but also (in Australia, South Africa and the United States, particularly) to repeated, indiscriminate massacres by British settlers. And the British record at improving the welfare of its colonial subjects is, at best, mixed. India, the largest colony ruled by London, began the colonial period with per capita incomes as high as those in England itself, and ended it as one of the poorest countries on earth. Ferguson says that the problem in India—and perhaps I will not be alone in detecting a pattern here—was that the British "did not colonize India fully enough." Given the unprecedented amounts of money and talent the British poured into its crown jewel over 150 years, that is a difficult case to make.

But Ferguson argued that not only was the British empire good, but that a similarly liberal American empire could also play a crucial role in the world today. "Capitalism and democracy," Ferguson wrote, "are not naturally occurring, but require strong institutional foundations of law and order. The proper role of an imperial America is to establish these institutions where they are lacking, if necessary . . . by military force."

He also went a good deal further than that. An American failure to take up the imperial yoke, he wrote last year, would result in a dangerous and chaotic "apolarity." The last time the world was truly apolar, Ferguson is fond of saying, was in the ninth century, "and that was the age of the Vikings. There are Vikings today too, only they're not pagans, they're zealous monotheists, and they're a real threat to America and her allies."

When Ferguson says the United States ought to be an empire, he meant precisely that: He wants America to use her might to exercise benign, formal control over other countries. He does not mean a cultural hegemony, or a network of economically and militarily dependent regimes, like the United States worked through in the Cold War. Nor does he favor a role for the United

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Nations, which he regards (like a generation of writers who saw the U.N.-flubbed deterioration of Yugoslavia up close) as incapable of arranging an effective international system. If the world were made into a movie, for Ferguson, the United Nations would be played by Peter Sellers—faultlessly polite, but intolerably dithering. If an American empire is going to work, Ferguson argued, it is going to have to look as much like its British predecessor as possible.

Ferguson is awfully specific about this. America, he argues, must refit its military to undertake decades-long occupations of foreign nations. It must export settlers, who bring Western values to the rest of the world. It must add a branch of government, the equivalent of the India Civil Service, to provide civil administration to conquered territories.

A comparison this rigid doesn't make sense: The world is too greatly changed. As Ferguson documented in graphic detail in *Empire*, building an empire has always been rough, unsavory stuff. Native populations are massacred. Women are raped. The rebellious are burned at the stake. In the 19th century, when British goons were building their empire this way, their transgressions happened at distances of weeks-long journeys by ship and rail, in places far from the spotlight. Now, we know of the violations our troops must commit—whether firing on a wedding party or torturing prisoners or inadvertently bombing an embassy—within days, if not hours. And we are right to refuse to stomach them.

But it is not just Americans who are confronted with these images. People in Riyadh and Karbala and Dhaka see them, too. It is difficult to argue that the war in Iraq has settled, rather than inflamed, violent anti-American feelings throughout the Islamic world. The escalating pace of terrorist attacks and plots in Saudi Arabia, Spain, Jordan, and elsewhere suggests that the images of the American occupation in Iraq have only made moderate Muslims into anti-Americans, and given broader popular support to the ideologies and organizations we are trying to defeat. There is always some kickback over empire, but technology makes that backlash come sooner, and harder.

Ferguson is certainly right—though far from unique—when he writes that to preserve its own security and economic well-being, the United States will have to shed any lasting isolationist tendencies to take an involved role in world affairs. But to argue that the British empire should provide the model now because, Ferguson says, it worked in the past just doesn't track—it gives history far too big a role in determining current policy. New realities demand new solutions. Most successful armies in human history have won on the strength of their cavalries, but we're not about to put the American military on horseback.

Ferguson's theory runs smack into the unsuccessful experience of empires over the last hundred years. Not only did the British and every other European imperial power crumble in the first half of the 20th century, but in the second half attempts to cling to imperial remnants, as the French did in Algeria, or to impose them—think Russia in Afghanistan, or us in Iraq, have also run aground on the resistance of local populations. It's worth noting that the only successful efforts at nation-building have been conducted by the international community, as in Bosnia or Kosovo, where the natives have accepted the legitimacy of rule.

Unilateral empire might work today if the world beyond America's borders were populated by five billion Buddhist monks, willing to calmly endure. But the truth is that even the most benign American unilateral efforts overseas spark deep-seated suspicion and antagonism, and send the most apolitical street kids heading for the local Kaloshnikov dealer. Remember the old joke, where an economist plotting his escape from the bottom of a well begins by saying: "Assume a ladder." Ferguson is similarly improbable: He begins his discussion of America's place in the world by saying, in effect, "Assume docile natives."

Tweaking the CW

Ferguson says that we shouldn't evaluate the idea of empire by the failure of imperial efforts during the last 50 years, because the would-be imperialists have lacked the will and political support to commit themselves fully to an imperial policy, to risk the needed troops and the funds. The French in Algeria lacked the will, as do the Americans in Iraq. This is the central argument of *Colossus*.

The United States, Ferguson argues in his new book, is not equipped to be the empire it should, since it suffers from three distinct deficits. Its economy, sure to stagger under massive Social Security and Medicare debts, is simply too crippled to fund an empire. We simply don't have enough troops and diplomats to staff a vast collection of overseas possessions. And, for Ferguson most damning of all, we lack the stomach for extensive engagements abroad. "When America actually undertakes a long-term commitment, as in the Cold War, it works," he said. "When it doesn't, which is the far more frequent case, you get Haiti—which is of course what Iraq is about to become, Port-au-Prince on the Tigris."

But America's ill-preparedness, both emotionally and structurally, to take on an imperial role was clearly evident before we invaded Iraq—and Ferguson was perfectly aware of it. He published a series of op-eds on the eve of war raising concerns that America was prepping too few troops and seemed to be planning for too short a stay. Yet those same essays were otherwise robust defenses of the nobility of the American exercise in Iraq and the American imperial project in general. During our interview, he said, a little lamely, that he had

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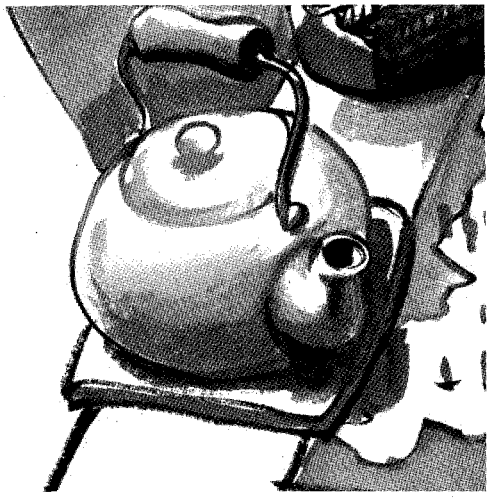
been hoping that America's "better instincts would take over."

But the simple truth may be that, like many other pro-war intellectuals, Ferguson was so seduced by the boldness of his idea that he neglected to follow the logic of the evidence he saw. And the simple explanation for the failure of the imperial and quasi-imperial attempts of the last 50 years may not be that France, Russia, and the United States all went about it all wrong, but that the project of empire is just not possible in today's world, that the prevailing political tempers, on each side of the colonial equation, won't permit it.

Ferguson, like a retreating army, is now shooting his slow horses. First, in *Colossus*, he pulled back from the idea of American empire that has, so far, come to define his career for many Americans. In a frank, similar move, he told me that *Colossus* was "vulnerable to attack," and that his books on empire were "edutainment at best." There are not many authors willing to spend their publicity junkets openly denigrating the books they are ostensibly trying to sell.



The attempt at empire-building Ferguson pushed America towards in Iraq is clearly failing. But rather than question his own thinking, he now argues that a bigger, better version of American empire would have worked and still could.

Ferguson's errors have been far more consequential for the country than they appear to have been to his career. It is impossible, of course, to say precisely how much his ideas helped drive the administration towards war. But for a brief, decisive moment, in the months leading up to the war, his notion that the United States was destined to become, in Thomas Jefferson's old phrase, an "empire of liberty," one that would both protect our security and bring freedom to the oppressed of the world, captured the imaginations of a significant part of Washington's foreign policy elite. Ferguson told me that, when he looked at his publisher's sales records, he saw that *Empire* had sold far better in the nation's capital than anywhere else in the country.

British invasion

Ferguson is in many ways characteristic of the intellectuals who have urged the Bush administration to its most important foreign policy decisions. He is brilliant, but having just started writing about empire five years ago, hardly an expert on his chosen topic. (Similarly, there are strikingly few Middle East experts among the group of prominent administration hawks who have been dictating policy in that region—though there are a fair number of Russia scholars). Then, too, he thinks of himself as a counter-conventional thinker, whose role is to discern what is hidebound about institutional thinking and then expose it, rather than build his theories from original research. He has a tendency to regard popular wisdom as necessarily fallible, and the institutions which generate it—the academy, newspapers— as corrupted by their own ideologies. In the same way in which Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith believed that the evidence provided by America's intelligence agencies about the Iraq threat was necessarily incorrect because it emerged from a corrupt bureaucracy with the wrong precepts, and that an independent intelligence body with the correct theory was needed to properly interpret the data (the Office of Special Plans), so Ferguson seems to believe that conventional academic histories are corrupt because they emerge from ideologically wrong-headed universities. Like Wolfowitz, Ferguson is a dazzling thinker, dismissive of those with greater expertise. And like OSP, the historian eschews original research; instead, he makes his career by reading up on other people's evidence and then coming to widely divergent conclusions.

Ferguson told me he was regarding his forthcoming move to Harvard as a retreat to the ivory tower, as a chance to start doing archival work once more. "*The House of Rothschild* was really my best book," he told me, "and it was that because I actually did dusty-fingered research in the archives—that's where the real breakthroughs always happen, anyway." Since he quit archival work, his histories have suffered; they tend to sprawl out of control, and hunt down evidence to support his guiding theories. If he does return to the stacks, it may eventually give him a way to rebuke those who think that his true talent to date has been for sloganeering and publicity, not legitimate scholarly breakthroughs. But it will not undo the damage his ideas about empire have helped to bring about. ◆

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Jesus Christ, Superstar

When Hollywood stopped making Bible movies, right-wing Christians took over.

By Amy Sullivan

Not too long ago, I attended a party thrown by my evangelical next-door neighbors in our Capitol Hill neighborhood. In the past, these gatherings—an evening packed in a house with 50 or 60 conservative evangelicals, most of whom attend the same Baptist church—were rife with social minefields. There may have been beer in the refrigerator and Madonna on the stereo, but the conversation was not similarly secular; it was only a matter of time before I was identified as a recovering-Baptist-turned-liberal-Episcopalian. Introduced as "the Democrat" to partygoers who work for Sen. Rick Santorum, write for conservative publications, or work in the Bush White House, I often found myself patiently explaining that, yes, it was possible to be a Christian and a Democrat. "I once knew a guy in college who was a Democrat!" one friendly fellow exclaimed upon meeting me, cementing my impression that, in this crowd, I was a rare and somewhat baffling specie.

On this particular evening, however, I had a foolproof plan for fitting in. I had just read the first two books in the 12-part *Left Behind* series that has sold more than 60 million copies worldwide, primarily in evangelical circles. Beginning with the onset of "the Rapture" (the event that some Christians believe will result in the spontaneous ascension to heaven of all true-believers), the books paint a picture of what would happen if the events predicted in the biblical Book of Revelations occurred now. Modern-day heroes Rayford Steele and Buck Williams lead a merry band of recent converts—the "Tribulation Force"—through action/adventure plots that are more Tom Clancy than Thomas Aquinas, with a fair amount of right-wing politicking thrown in for good measure. I was prepared to discuss the series with any and all comers at the party.

There was just one problem. No one I talked to would admit to having read any of the books. A number of people conceded, "Oooh, yeah, my mom read those," wrinkling their noses and giving embarrassed shrugs. Several women offered that they had thought about reading the books after the former "Growing Pains" star, and heartthrob of our teen years, Kirk Cameron made a movie adaptation of the first installment. But after even some Christian publications panned the film, they had reconsidered.

I was surprised. Yes, they were all well-educated Washington wonks, but these same people weren't above devouring a Tom Clancy or John Grisham book at the beach. Most of them didn't require a leap of faith to accept the theological premises of the books. They were familiar with the teaching that says the Rapture will be followed by seven years of trials and tribulations, at the end of which Jesus will come to earth once again to lead the forces of good against the forces of evil in the battle known as Armageddon. In between the two cataclysmic events, those who are left behind at the Rapture have the chance to become faithful Christians and thus

Amy Sullivan is a doctoral student in sociology at Princeton University and the author of Political aims, www.politicalaims.com.

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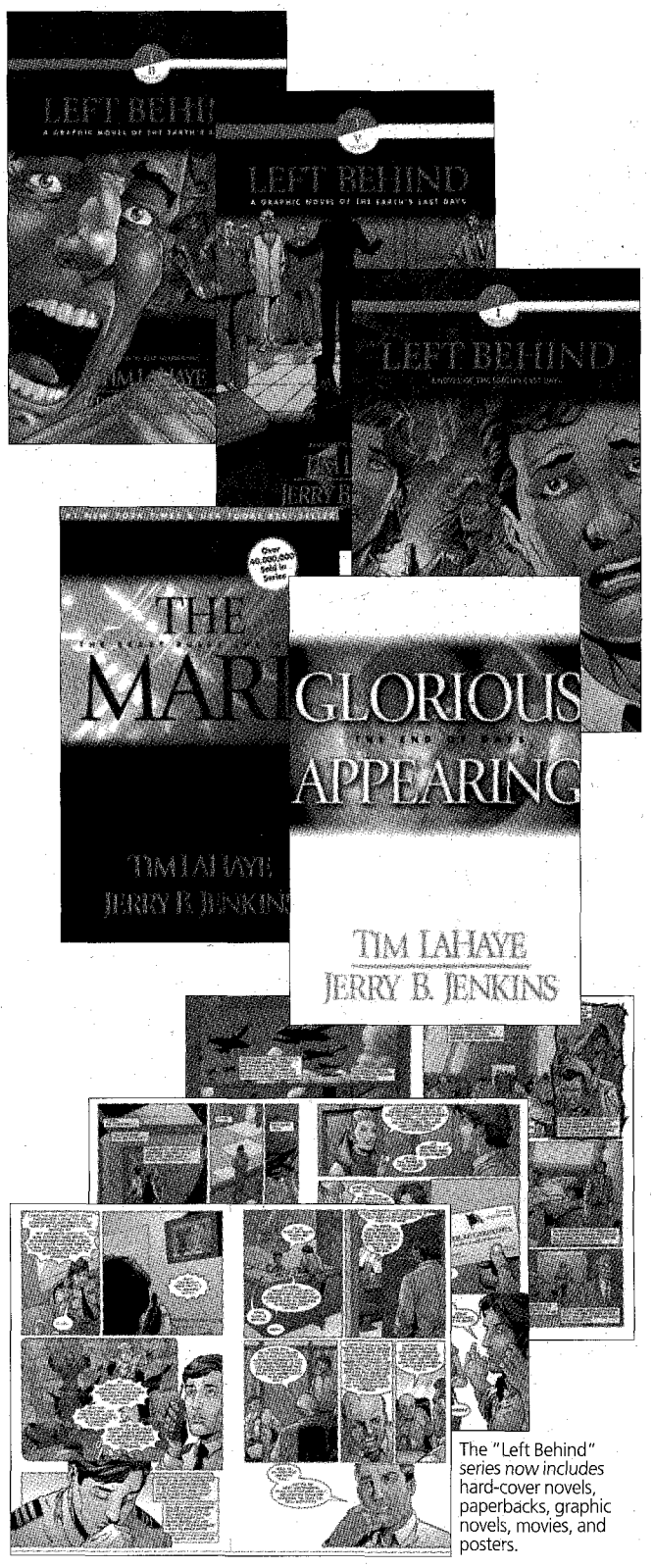
make it to heaven in a sort of divine do-over. While my friends are poised to be precisely the kind of Christians who are not left behind, they would have more than a passing interest in the adventures of the Tribulation Force as it struggles to convert the rest of mankind while simultaneously disrupting the plans of the Anti-Christ, who rules the earth during the seven terrible years of the Apocalypse.

Nor was it the book's politics that kept them away. Most of the partygoers would agree with the general political thrust of the series, in which any number of liberal causes come under attack. In this particular imagining of Revelations, the Anti-Christ isn't just any world leader, but the Secretary General of the United Nations (a title he changes to "Global Community Supreme Potentate"). And his nefarious plans to take over the earth include the standardization of the world's currencies and languages, global disarmament (requiring our heroes to stockpile weapons, militia-like, in order to stand up to Satanic forces), and a peace treaty in the Middle East. Throughout the series, journalists and academics—two prime conservative targets—come in for a special beating, their skepticism and intellectualism being the main obstacles, after all, to truly embracing Christian belief.

If neither the politics nor the theology of the books turned off this crowd, it wasn't immediately clear why no one had read a single installment in the series. The real answer came from one woman who grimaced as she told me, "I heard they were really poorly written."

And how. The books are overrun with stilted dialogue and cardboard characters, and they require the near-complete suspension of disbelief. For the average evangelical, the occurrence of the Rapture is a perfectly envisionable event. What is unbelievable is the premise that the Ted Koppels of the world would set aside their skepticism and fall all over themselves to praise the Anti-Christ (known in the series as Nicolae Carpathia, a Romanian businessman), swooning over his dazzling ability to name every country in the world. Or that the Anti-Christ could just up and relocate the United Nations to Babylon (modern-day Iraq), without so much as a peep of dissent from any world leader. And when, after 12 books, the second coming, Armageddon, and the Judgment of Satan, all of the saints from throughout history return to earth and Jesus's thousand-year rule begins, the series ends thus: "As Buck and Chloe continued to interact with Irene and Amanda, Rayford borrowed Raymie. 'There are so many people I want to see, Son. You must meet them all. And we've only got a thousand years.'"

Given that these books are so god-awful, why then have they sold more than 60 million copies? Part of the reason is the growing size and power of the evangelical subculture in America. Indeed, for some anxious liberals, the popularity of the series has been taken as proof that the Apocalypse is indeed almost upon us, and that it will come in the form of a society overrun by John Ashcroft and Charlton Heston mini-mes who scan the horizon for black helicopters and stride around quoting scripture. But there is another explanation: Millions of Christians, not all of them right-wing or even evangelical, have been devouring these badly written books, crackpot politics and all, because there is virtually no other entertaining Christian-themed fiction out there. The staggering popularity of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* owes much of its success to the same source. The film may be anti-Semitic and grotesquely violent and represent one man's conservative interpretation of the gospels, but at least it's a Jesus movie. When was the last time Hollywood produced one of those?



The "Left Behind" series now includes hard-cover novels, paperbacks, graphic novels, movies, and posters.

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Lens Commandments

America's mainstream entertainment industry has not always been so oblivious to the Christian market. Hollywood studios used to churn out biblical epics at a steady pace, raking in millions of dollars—and, sometimes, Oscars—with predictable crowd-pleasers. Cecil B. DeMille directed a number of biblical movies, including the silent screen classic *King of Kings* and the 1949 film *Samson and Delilah* with Hedy Lamarr and Victor Mature. Gregory Peck starred in *David and Bathsheba*, Anthony Quinn headed a star cast in *Barabbas*, Kirk Douglas won a Best Actor Oscar for *Spartacus*, and a pre-political Charlton Heston brought down the house in both *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*. To the extent that any political bias was discernible in the films, it was vaguely liberal, taking on the status quo and the established political power. Around the same time, Christian writers like C.S. Lewis were international superstars, selling millions of copies of *The Screwtape Letters*, a satirical correspondence between two devils strategizing about the best way to tempt their human target and thus bring him to spiritual ruin.

And then, sometime in the 1960s, religiously-themed entertainment simply disappeared. Why that happened is anyone's guess; a hip disdain for traditional cultural mores, perhaps, or a heightened fear of offending religious minorities. In any event, it was a major, if underappreciated, break. For nearly 2,000 years, the story of Jesus and broader biblical epics had infused the cultural environment of the average Westerner. Now those influences were suddenly nowhere to be seen. In the rare instances that movies did center on religious topics, they took the form of the irreverent (*The Life of Brian*), the mildly heretical (*Jesus Christ Superstar*), or the controversial (*The Last Temptation of Christ*). On television, Linus's recitation from the second chapter of Luke at the end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965 was perhaps the last respectful reference to Jesus that Hollywood offered America's children. In general, with the exception of a few bland made-for-television movies, popular culture has limited religion to the rather harmless, generic use of angels as gimmicks—"Touched by an Angel," *Angels in the Outfield*—or poorly made and under-funded Bible films such as last fall's *The Gospel of John*, described by one catatonic reviewer as "the longest Sunday School class ever."

At about the same time that popular culture began to ignore, if not irritate, traditional Christians, the evangelical movement—long a subculture—took off. This was perhaps not a coincidence. Evangelicals, with their heightened sense of the sinful nature of the secular world, have traditionally cultivated a feeling of separateness from mainstream American life. A series of political and cultural trends in the 1960s and'70s—from court decisions legalizing abortion and outlawing prayer in schools to the spread of sex and violence in popular entertainment—both mobilized this group and reinforced their sense of cultural isolation. When the entertainment industry also stopped reflecting their religious values and history, evangelicals had just one more reason to feel set apart.

By the 1980s, conservative Christian leaders and institutions began to fill the void. First came nationwide cable talk shows like the 700 Club (which launched Pat Robertson's briefly successful GOP political career). Soon, a nascent infrastructure emerged to produce and distribute other kinds of Christian entertainment, such as the music of Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith.

Missing Cecil B. DeMille

Then, too, came the novels of conservative Christian author Frank Peretti. If you grew up Baptist in the 1980s, as I did, you probably read his books. In *This Present Darkness*, Peretti's first novel, the innocent little town of Ashton becomes the site of a thrilling spiritual battle when the forces of evil (in the form of a New Age cult) try to take over the town, and are held at bay by a young pastor, the local newspaper editor, and a small band of prayerful believers. As the human drama plays out, skirmishes also take place between angels ("the heavenly host") and demons ("the armies of Lucifer"). Growing stronger as the prayers of the faithful multiply, the surprisingly witty angels swoop and soar, brandishing swords of fire and dispatching demons with a glee that matches that of the warriors in *The Lord of the Rings*. For their part, the sulfurous demons—including Complacency, Deception, Lust, and Greed—use talons to attach themselves to humans and wreak havoc, repelled only by the rebukes and prayers of Christians on their knees.

In addition to spiritual action and adventure, Peretti's books served up a heavy dose of conservative politics. In *This Present Darkness*, Satan's minions set up shop in the psychology department of the local liberal arts college; the New Age cult is led by a professor who preys on intellectually curious students and by the minister of a namby-pamby Protestant church who preaches moral relativism. The villains in the sequel, *Piercing the Darkness*, are only loosely disguised as the ACLU and show up to harass good God-fearing folk by shutting down private Christian schools.

I always rolled my eyes or cringed at these conservative bits, even as I thoroughly enjoyed the stories. When I reread several of the books at the beach recently, I still found them fascinating. With masterful pacing, humor, and the help of some butt-kicking angels, Peretti crafted thrillers certain to capture the imagination of anyone who was raised to think of prayer as an active experience. I've long since forgotten whether I first heard of the books at a Baptist youth group convention or an Amy Grant concert, but I can still remember how to rebuke a troublesome demon.

At the height of their popularity, Peretti's well-written books sold half a million copies. The horribly written *Left Behind* series, by contrast, has sold 120 times as many. This disparity is not explained by a sudden decline of reader taste, but by the increasing sophistication of the Christian entertainment industry. Peretti's novels could only be purchased

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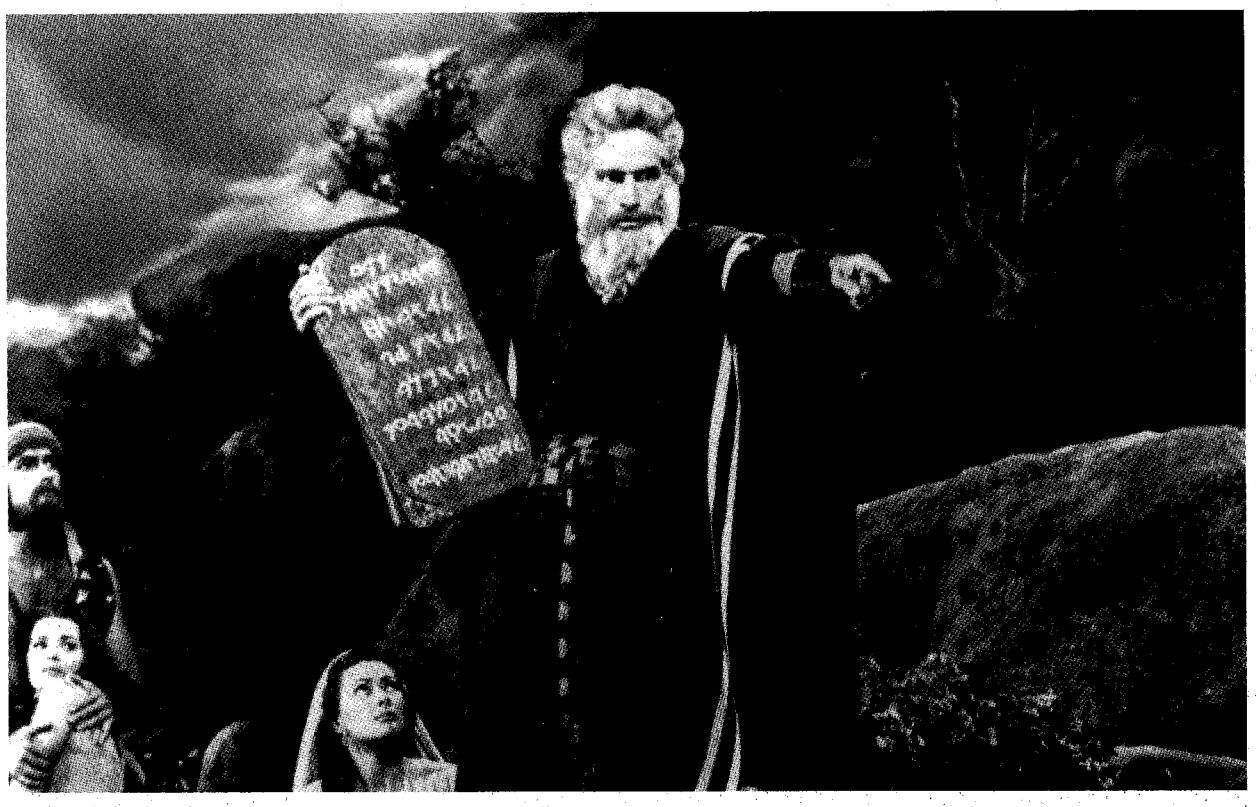

in Christian bookstores or special-ordered by a church librarian. The *Left Behind* books, while similarly marketed that way, were also packaged to evangelical churches with study guides for book groups, comic book versions, a kids series, a Web site, trivia games, a special military thriller series, greeting cards, calendars, and a special "Prophecy Club," complete with a weekly newsletter. More than that, the books can also be found on the shelves of every airport bookstore in the country, are carried in mass quantities by chain bookstores and Wal-Mart, and regularly top the sales ranking at Amazon.com.

Bold Testaments

A similar story explains the monumental success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Just as *Left Behind* authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins had exploited a vast market of Christian readers underserved by New York publishers, Gibson tapped the public hunger for a high-quality depiction of Jesus's life that Hollywood has ignored for decades. While controversial, Gibson's production was inarguably well-made, with the look and feel of a studio blockbuster. It had the success of one, as well. Opening on 4,400 screens, the movie was number one for three weeks in a row and in the first week alone nearly doubled Gibson's investment of $30 million to make the film and $25 million to market it. What was billed by many as a "Christian movie" has become simply one of the most successful movies of any kind, generating impressive revenues even in self-consciously secular countries like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Anybody who cares about both the spiritual and political health of the country has to have mixed emotions about the runaway success of *The Passion* and the *Left Behind* series. The fact that there is a hunger for religious entertainment isn't surprising nor is it a big deal. The fact that the only books and movies available come packaged with a heavily right-wing slant is. And not just because I, and millions of other Christians, would like to sit down with a spiritual thriller or watch a Jesus movie without being bombarded with conservative politics.

This is a problem because when the only Christian-themed entertainment in the marketplace is laced with conservatism, Christianity itself will increasingly take on a conservative cast. The faith of Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr is not the faith of Tim LaHaye and Mel Gibson. Yet the more that single interpretation of Christianity dominates airwaves and bookshelves, the more people of faith are tempted to believe that the only way to be a "good" Christian is to be a conservative.

It's impossible to know whether the *Left Behind* books would still sell 60 million copies if they had a little competition. Or if a star-studded, well-financed liberal movie about the resurrection would have stolen some of *The Passion*'s audience. But there's no reason not to try. Open up the Bible to practically any page (okay, skip Lamentations) and you can find enough classic morality tales and adventure stories to fill dozens of books and movies. Looking for war? Romance? Spy thriller? Buddy movie? Fantasy? Action/adventure? It's all there. Reclaiming some of the Christian market would cut into the profits of Tim LaHaye and Mel Gibson; provide a richer interpretation of Scripture; fatten the bottom lines of Hollywood and New York, and just might save American politics, to boot. Amen. ◆

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Frontier Myth

The spirit of the American pioneer did not inspire modern-day conservativism.

By Michael Lind

American readers of the "Lexington" column in the British newsmagazine *The Economist* often have the same response to its survey of a particular U.S. state or region: Many of the details are right, but the picture as a whole is not quite recognizable. American readers of *The Right Nation*, by *The Economist*'s U.S. editor John Micklethwait and its Washington correspondent, Adrian Wooldridge, may have similar reaction. Micklethait and Wooldridge are intelligent, entertaining writers, and first-rate reporters. But their analysis of both contemporary American politics and U.S. political history is as conceptually flawed as it is politically biased.

Although the authors claim that "we are not members of either of the two great political tribes that dominate the American commentariat," the truth is that they and *The Economist* belong to the libertarian wing of the right (and the imperial wing, too—*The Economist* was a cheerleader for the disastrous war in Iraq). By repeatedly attributing the political success of the Republican right to its alleged roots in America's core political traditions, the authors lend credence to Reagan Interior Secretary James Watt's 1980s claim that the real distinction is not between liberals and conservatives but between liberals and Americans.

The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America

By John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge

The Penguin Press; $25.95

The thesis of *The Right Nation* is that the present Republican ascendancy is the result, not of a temporary national political coalition and the exaggeration of the conservative minority's power by the electoral college and the Senate, but rather of deep trends in American society whose values are represented more truly by Republicans than by Democrats. The Republican Party is not a loose coalition of different groups, but the political manifestation of a "right nation"—a coherent conservative tribe which Micklethwait and Wooldridge all too often identify with America as a whole. What the European left hates about the "right nation"—religiosity, laissez-faire economics, the gun culture, foreign policy unilateralism—are precisely the features that make the United States "American," according to these two British writers.

As this summary suggests, *The Right Nation* is a contribution to the emerging literature which holds that American society, and not merely the electoral college, is divided into a conservative "red nation" and a liberal "blue nation" (their "right nation" is simply another word for "red nation.") In reality, the "red nation/right nation" does not exist, except on maps of electoral college voting. The Republican Party electorate today is largely a coalition of three distinct subcultures—Southern whites, Northern Catholic "ethnics," and Prairie Protestants of Yankee, German, and Scandinavian descent (Jewish and non-Jewish neoconservatives are important in the elite but not the electorate). Micklethwait and Wooldridge do not analyze the Catholic ethnics or the Prairie Protestants, without whose votes the Republican Party would be a minority coalition representing only the former Confederate states. They recognize the Southern influence on the right, but tend to treat the South's synthesis of God, guns, and free trade as

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though it were a variant of a common national conservative tradition. But if the base of the right were Catholic ethnics in the Northeast and Midwest, American conservatism would resemble European Christian democracy, combining social conservatism with support for a strong and paternalistic welfare state. And if conservatism were defined by Prairie Protestants, it would be a synthesis of fiscal restraint and social liberalism. (By the same token, there is no "blue" or "left nation" either; the groups that make up the Democratic Party's electoral coalition share little in common other than a desire to elect Democrats.)

In addition to perpetuating the red/blue fallacy, Micklethwait and Wooldridge repeat the conventional wisdom about the divide between America (religious, gun-loving, libertarian) and Europe (secular, pacifist, statist). The real division, however, is not between the United States and Europe, but between the more individualistic English-speaking nations as a whole (sometimes called the Anglosphere) and the more statist societies of continental Europe. Once the South is factored out, the United States looks much more like Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Like many foreign (and East Coast) observers, Micklethwait and Wooldridge can't distinguish the Yankee-Germanic West from the Anglo-Celtic South (which includes Texas, more a Southern than a Western state). They erroneously attribute America's fundamentalist religiosity and gun culture to its historic frontier experience: "Yet many of the rootless people of the new frontier combined this reinvention with a fierce thirst for the solace of religion....Meanwhile, the frontier also inured Americans to violence. Guns were essential to people who were taming a wild frontier." But the Southern right finds its closest allies on social issues not among heartland Lutherans but among urban Catholics. And the gun culture is alien to Prairie Protestants, whose social values, according to recent surveys of "civic culture," remain close to those of the Midwest and New England—even if they do vote for Republicans nowadays.

The truth is that the fervent Protestantism and the penchant for violence of the Bible Belt South are not responses to the American frontier environment. These traits are ethnic inheritances that the Scots-Irish brought with them from Northern Ireland in the 18th century and took with them as they moved from the Appalachians to the Ozarks to finally, Southern California in the 1930s as "Okies." The historian David Hackett Fischer, the journalist Kevin Phillips, and others, including myself, have written at length about this topic, so Micklethwait and Wooldridge have no excuse for recycling the discredited "frontier" thesis at this late date. Indeed, as Britons they should recognize the close religious and cultural affinities between the Scots-Irish American South and Ulster.

The Right Nation is just as misleading when it comes to the history of liberalism and conservatism. Today's liberalism is treated as a continuation of the liberalism of FDR and LBJ; thus, the authors entitle one chapter "The Melancholy Long Withdrawing Roar of Liberalism." By the same token, they treat today's conservatism as an outgrowth of the Goldwater-Buckley conservatism of the 1960s. In doing so, they follow the conventional wisdom—but that is no excuse. The truth is that the post-60s Civil Rights Democrats—essentially a coalition of left-liberal blacks, Jews, northern Protestants and Latinos—were a new, different party, not a later stage of the New Deal Democrats whose coalition included Southern segregationists and Catholic social conservatives. By the same token, today's Republicans are dominated by former Southern Democrats or "Dixiecrats." The electoral maps appended at the front of the book, which show the two parties switching their regional bases, are labeled "The Changing Geography of the Right Nation." This label makes sense only if one equates "liberal" with Democrat and "conservative" with Republican. But the South has simply exchanged right-wing Democrats for right-wing Republicans.

"If our story has been one of conservative success, it has also been one of liberal failure," Micklethwait and Wooldridge write. Really? Liberals in the New Deal tradition have been defeated in their attempts to create universal health-care coverage, a goal since the 1930s. But the far more numerous defeats of the right have forced conservatives to abandon their goals and crawl toward the center. In the Cold War, Reagan dropped the right's "rollback" policy and adopted the liberal containment strategy. The Republican right has not only abandoned its opposition to Medicare but has also extended its scope and cost. A Republican Supreme Court has struck down sodomy laws and upheld affirmative action. Plans for partial privatization of Social Security are compatible with that program's purpose; indeed, President Clinton almost proposed the idea. Government policies encouraging widespread single-family home ownership and suburbanization, which Micklethwait and Wooldridge identify with conservatism and the frontier (again, the damned frontier!) are examples of successful New Deal social engineering. Unable to repeal any major New Deal/Great Society/Civil Rights program, and lacking anything beyond trivial policy initiatives (like faith-based welfare), the Republican right has focused on making the tax system that funds the Rooseveltian state more regressive—a bad policy, but hardly a conservative counter-revolution.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge concede: "It is worth admitting that the conservative movement's two main crusades—against big government and moral decay—have so far been more successful as rallying cries than as policies." The profound failure of the conservative counter-revolution against the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Civil Rights revolution proves the enduring power of the center in American politics. If Micklethwait and Wooldridge had written a book about how centrists have frustrated both conservatives and the left and had titled it *The Central Nation*, they would have broken with the conventional wisdom. But they would have been right.

Michael Lind, the Whitehead senior fellow at the New America Foundation, is the author of *Made in Texas: The Southern Takeover of American Politics.*

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Canal Instincts

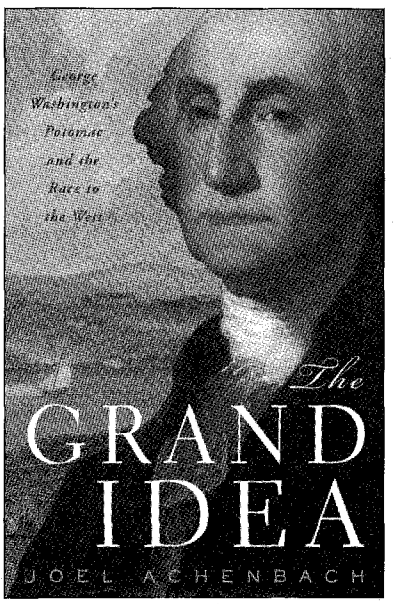
George Washington once dreamed of turning America into a new Venice.

By Adam Clymer

Contemporary presidents come to be judged in broad strokes, though different partisans have different brushes—George W. Bush as moral and resolute, or as dogmatic and incurious; Bill Clinton as immoral, or as caring. Comparable contemporary disputes are more a kind of background noise when we measure those we know only from history books and biographies. They settle in our minds for an attribute or two that fit together, though sometimes we acknowledge the complexities or contradictions in a slaveholding Thomas Jefferson proclaiming the equality of man or an experimental Franklin Roosevelt, committed not to any fixed principle (except perhaps a healthy skepticism toward his own class), but to finding solutions from all kinds of sources.

George Washington has been the subject of less recent historical redefinition than his contemporaries Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, or his latter-day successors Dwight Eisenhower or Harry Truman. For years, Washington has been depicted, almost uniformly, as sober, brave, and dedicated, as a gentleman concerned with maintaining a good reputation, as perhaps a bit fussy, but above all, as virtuous. And perhaps a little dull.

In his new book, *The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West*, *Washington Post* writer Joel Achenbach does not upset those impressions. His Washington is as serious as the man described in Douglas Southall Freeman's acclaimed 1948 biography, or in the historian James Thomas Flexner's admiring four-volume series on the first president. Achenbach acknowledges that his book tells a story that has been recounted by other scholars. But this book reveals a dimension of the man not often seen—that of Washington as a dreamer. The retired general imagined and then traced a route west to bind the Appalachian wilderness to the coastal states even before the 13 former colonies were themselves bound to one another.



The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West
By Joel Achenbach
Simon & Schuster; $26.00

The route Washington thought could connect the coast to the West was the Potomac River, whose headwaters, at least on a map, were not out of reach of the tributaries of the Ohio River. Achenbach is at his best in communicating to an age of interstate highway drivers why water was the only way for people to go any distance at all in the 18th century. "Roads in America were often hardly more than trails, choked with stumps," he writes. "Throughout the United States, bridges over major rivers simply didn't exist." In the back country, where Washington journeyed in 1784, it was worse. A typical road "did not have a uniform surface. Often it was just a tunnel in the vegetation. A traveler endured diabolical combinations of holes, mires and tree stumps. When a state government got around to chartering a road, it would specify how high the stumps could be. The more a road was traveled by horses and wagons, the more the surface became chewed up and rutted... Roads were not self-healing, and eventually, the track through the woods would not really be a road at all, just a linear bog."

"In optimistic moments," Achenbach writes, "the general could imagine that, someday, a person would be able to go almost anywhere by water. Canals would lace the landscape, connecting navigable rivers, linking every state, city and village." In a letter to a friend, Washington imagined that someday, with enough effort, it might be possible to bring water navigation "'to almost every man's door.'"

North and South, the Atlantic Ocean connected the 13 states, but East and West, long before the invention of dynamite, the mountains barred the way—except where the rivers cut through. The future president set his sights on exploring the Potomac. Washington had traveled the upper reaches of the river during his youth as a surveyor and a soldier in the French and Indian War. He had later bought many tracts of Western land, some close to the Potomac, others even further away from Mount Vernon.

In September 1784, Washington set out from Mount Vernon on what became a 34-day, 680-mile journey west, in part to collect overdue rents

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George Washington Crossing the Delaware, by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze (1851)

from his tenants in Maryland and Pennsylvania. He also undertook the trip to confirm his romantic belief that the Potomac could be made navigable not just by canoes, but also by boats that could carry goods, and that a suitable road could connect it to some equally navigable river leading to the Ohio.

But there was nothing romantic about the journey. Here is Achenbach's description, based on Washington's diary, of one day's ride: "Dawn to dusk, 35 miles on horrible roads in a still-pounding rain, the brush threatening to swallow them at every turn. They rode from the North Branch of the Potomac on a generally southeast trajectory, up and across one mountain, and down a 'very steep and bad' road to a major Potomac tributary called Patterson's Creek. They crossed that creek, then another creek, then climbed another mountain."

The book explains why the Potomac idea failed in the long run, despite Washington's intense and successful efforts to bring Maryland and Virginia together to support and help finance a company to improve the river.

Ultimately, the program never worked because the Potomac, though made navigable for small boats for some 200 miles, was too shallow and unpredictable a river for steady, larger-scale transport. Moreover, neither of the ports downstream, Georgetown and Alexandria, offered a harbor good enough to compete with Baltimore's. Finally, in the 1820s, industrialists built the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to carry freight from the coast to the interior. Rails, unlike water, could flow uphill.

Achenbach often rambles, as when he retells the familiar story of Washington's reluctance to be president. The prose is sometimes overwrought, and at times, the writing is chatty verging on silly, as when he calls the Jeffersonian ideal of a small central government "a Mom and Pop business" and a "fruit-stand government."

Yet, Achenbach does illuminate a new side of Washington's character. He offers a telling insight when comparing Washington with Jefferson. While Jefferson had never personally traveled across the mountains, he had endless faith in the farmers who settled beyond, and as president he expanded the nation on a continental scale with the Louisiana Purchase. On the other hand, Washington was an experienced traveler who had seen the frontier firsthand yet, as Achenbach writes, remained aloof on his journeys: "When the general moved among frontier folk, he didn't mix. He passed over these people like a dark nimbus cloud. He once referred to ordinary farmers as 'the grazing multitude.'"

Achenbach points up the contradiction between the dreamy Washington and the world-weary one when he annotates Washington's diary entry upon completing his 1784 journey: "'The more the Navigation of Potomac is investigated, & duly considered,' said the man who had seen almost nothing but rapids, rocks, low-life squatters, land-jobbers, speculators, broken-down taverns, boggy roads, gloomy forests and nearly impossible portages, "'the greater the advantages arising from them appear.'"

Readers come away with a more affectionate notion of a man whose paramount sense of duty enabled both the Revolution and the Republic that followed to succeed. He may not have been as exciting a figure as Jefferson or Adams, Patrick Henry or Tom Paine, but he too had dreams, and happily for readers, Achenbach rediscovers them.

Adam Clymer, political director of the National Annenberg Election survey, retired last summer as Washington correspondent for *The New York Times*.

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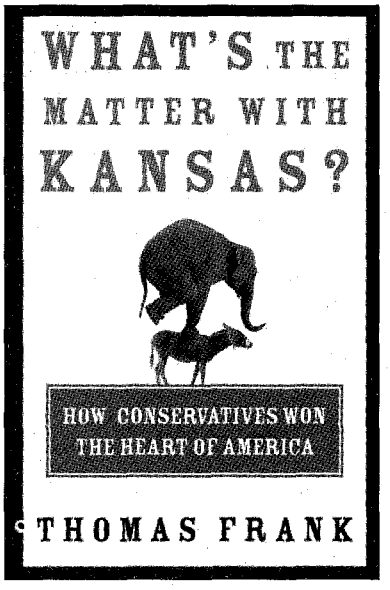
In Plains Sight

What liberals get wrong about Midwestern conservatives.

By Alan Bjerga

To most outsiders, especially those who lean left, Kansas might seem like an odd place. In recent years, you may have come across stories about the town of Geuda Springs, Kan., which last year passed an ordinance requiring its 210 residents to own a firearm. Or about Republican state senator Kay O'Connor, who a couple of years ago told members of a local League of Women Voters chapter that granting women the right to vote had fostered moral decline. Perhaps most famously, the state Board of Education ruled in 1999 that teaching evolution would be optional in Kansas schools.

But according to Thomas Frank, if you want to know where America's political culture is heading, look closely at the Sunflower State. Frank, editor of the political and literary journal *The Baffler* and author of *One Market, Under God*, grew up in Kansas, though he now lives in Washington, D.C. In his new book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Frank returns to his roots and finds "implacable bitterness" in the land of Toto and tornadoes. Kansas is among the reddest red states we've been hearing about since the 2000 elections, and Frank



What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America
By Thomas Frank
Metropolitan Books; $24.00

wonders why—as Wichita's aircraft manufacturers bleed jobs and western Kansas farms struggle to compete in the global market—the state's voters turn increasingly to the party of George W. Bush for answers.

A century ago, the Great Plains spawned the Populist Party, "Appeal to Reason," a famous socialist newspaper printed in Kansas, and William Jennings Bryan. But, as Frank tells it, beginning with the cultural backlash of the 1960s, conservative leaders learned to appropriate traditional populist language (people *v.* the powerful) and to transfer heartland voters' outrage over economic disparities to moral and cultural anti-elitism. This let the party of big business recast itself as friend of the little guy, with the educated "elite" classes as the new enemies of God and goodness. That would be fine, Frank argues, if the GOP has proven a good friend to the little guy. In Kansas, he contends, that's far from the case. Wichita, the state's largest city, is reeling from outsourced jobs and layoffs that could be stemmed, Frank believes, were it not for the slavish acceptance of GOP-backed free trade policies. Meanwhile, rural areas wither without farm support, and the few small towns that do thrive do so as low-tax, low-regulation corporate fiefdoms. Yet, Kansans routinely return to office Republicans who back the very policies that harm them.

What is the matter? Frank's answer is that because Democrats don't articulate a true economic alternative to the Republicans, culture war appeals win again and again, even though the right never actually delivers on its promises to end legal abortion or rein in sex-soaked pop culture. Instead, conservatives cut taxes for the wealthy, repeal business regulations, and stomp out unions—all with working-class support. "All that Kansas asks today," Frank writes in language that updates Bryan's, "is a little help nailing itself to that cross of gold."

Frank knocks a common leftist crutch—the temptation to dismiss the populist right as racist—by pointing out that Kansas isn't Alabama. The handy explanation of racism often used to describe the right's rise doesn't hold in Kansas, which prides itself on its heritage as the state where John Brown fired the first shots against slavery. Kansas may seem like an oddball state to headline-scanners, but it's really typically American, with sprawling

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Margaret Hamilton, Judy Garland, and Ray Bolger in MGM's *The Wizard of Oz*.

Culture clash outside of Kansas.

suburbs, struggling manufacturers and farmers, dying unions, and growing evangelical churches. Far from reactionary, Kansas, writes Frank, "is ready to lead us singing into the apocalypse."

Frank's historical analysis is flawed in some respects. He accurately describes how a moderately Republican state has shifted toward religious conservatism. But he should also know that, aside from its brief Populist Party phase, Kansas has never really sustained a strong progressive, anti-corporate tradition like those in Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Wisconsin—states where his explanation of how leftist economic populism was transformed into conservative cultural populism might be better applied.

Frank rightly notes that progressives often fail to understand the power of the backlash mindset. For all its internal contradictions, this antagonism to cultural elites explains the world to people of limited economic opportunities who feel like contemporary America has passed them by. It validates their circumstances, provides them with demons to fight, and offers them the Rock of Ages for comfort. How better to seek solace in a country that doesn't seem to value you, what you do, or where you live? At least Republicans promise a better life in the next world.

While Frank makes right-wing conservatives his primary target, he also criticizes centrist Democrats for moving the party to the middle on economic issues. He contends that only a renewed economic populism can counteract Republican cultural populism. Without it, Democrats lose the appeal that once made the Midwest a radical hotbed. Turn your back on your core economic values, and you get Kansas.

However, the state's most successful Democrat, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, is herself a protégée of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council. Last year, she backed $500 million in tax incentives to bring more Boeing work to Wichita, a move Frank calls a mistake. He dismisses Sebelius's winning the open governor's seat in 2002 as a fluke because religious conservatives that year nominated a GOP candidate so far to the right that many moderate Republicans bolted. But for the past century, the centrist approach has won more elections for Sunflower State Democrats than has railing against the money power —Sebelius is the rule, not the exception.

Many Kansans themselves will probably resent being told they're delusional for supporting the GOP by an ex-resident who moved to Chicago before relocating to Dupont Circle. But the inevitable resistance to the book doesn't make it less valuable. Frank's grounding in Kansas soil provides an original perspective on the right's takeover of Middle America. Frank has left the question of what to do about it for another book. In an interview, Frank acknowledged that *What's the Matter with Kansas?* is mainly meant to explain the backlash and warn of its implications—it's not intended to be a 12-step program on how Democrats can win heartland votes. Yet until the left figures out a counterplan that works, authors like him will have to keep on plowin'.

Alan Bjerga reports from the Washington D.C. bureau of Knight Ridder Newspapers, where he is the correspondent for *The Wichita Eagle*.

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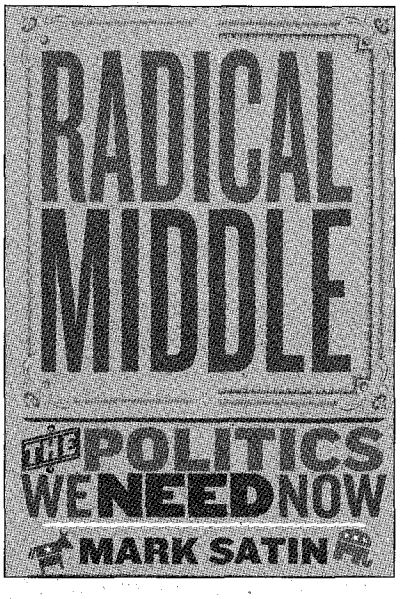
Good Government

Time to stop bashing the two-party system.

By Ed Kilgore

Journalist and activist Mark Satin is a man of causes. In the 1960s, he was part of the New Left, a war protester who moved to Canada to avoid the draft and rubbed elbows there with the Weathermen. In the 1970s, he became a New Age guru. These days, Satin is championing a new vision: solutions for America's problems that transcend the tired orthodoxies of the political left and right. Satin's book is written with an air of naïve discovery, as if this idea had just been invented. I can only welcome him to the cause.

Like many observers before him, Satin is fascinated by the paradox that underlies contemporary politics. America has become a "moderate nation" over the last two decades, with an electorate that is increasingly pragmatic, independent, and suspicious of the conventional pieties of the big-government and anti-globalist left and the anti-government and free-market right. Yet emergence of this moderate majority has been chronically frustrated by partisan polarization, the power of liberal and conservative interest groups in the two major parties, and a media establishment rarely capable of any political analysis that rises above the combat model of "Crossfire."



Radical Middle: The Politics We Need Now

By Mark Satin

Westview Press; $25.95

This paradox has produced a variety of responses from political observers. Many powerful forces in the Democratic and Republican parties continue to believe that "moderate" or independent impulses in the electorate reflect an ambivalence—or even cognitive dissonance—that will be dispelled when liberals or conservatives, as the case may be, powerfully make their ideological case and break the partisan gridlock of recent years. In general, however, Democrats have absorbed much of this moderate agenda: Their presumptive presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry, though often seen as a Massachusetts liberal, has supported welfare reform, tough deficit-reduction measures, rigorous teacher screening, and the robust use of American military force. On the other hand, moderates in the GOP are an endangered species in a party increasingly dominated by hard-line conservatives.

But these distinctions between the two parties are of little interest to Satin. Having spent his entire political life outside conventional politics, Satin firmly believes that the current system can't lead to the moderate majority he wants. The most "radical" thing about Mark Satin's *Radical Middle* is the extraordinary depth of the author's belief that identifying solutions to America's problems depends on spurning conventional party politics.

This is a curious charge, given that the bulk of the "radical middle" ideas he champions are, in fact, policies that New Democrat thinkers and politicians (and their center-left counterparts in Europe and elsewhere) have been pushing for years: universal access to private health insurance, a universal system of national service, merit pay to attract and reward good teachers, stakeholder grants to expand the "ownership class," affirmative-action efforts focused on economic disadvantage, not race, a military strategy that allows for humanitarian interventions, a pro-trade agenda for

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combating the causes of terrorism in the developing world, aggressive but regulated support for biotechnological research, and political reforms like non-partisan redistricting, among other standards. Satin does a good job in laying out these "third way" policies concisely, and his advocacy is more than welcome. But his insistence that these policies cannot be implemented by the conventional parties is just plain bizarre. Many of these same ideas can be found in Sen. Kerry's platform.

Satin is hardly alone in his anti-political politics. From the endnotes in each chapter, it's clear that Satin has dog-eared his copy of Ted Halstead and Michael Lind's *The Radical Center*, which supplied a more sophisticated take on the premise that a majority of Americans might embrace a policy agenda outside the normal frameworks of the two parties. Halstead and Lind did a vastly better job than Satin does at explaining the structural barriers the two parties face to embracing truly innovative policies. But in the end, they, like Satin, could not really outline a practical path forward for the pragmatic agenda, other than vague but alluring hope for a new third party or a transformation of one of the two major parties.

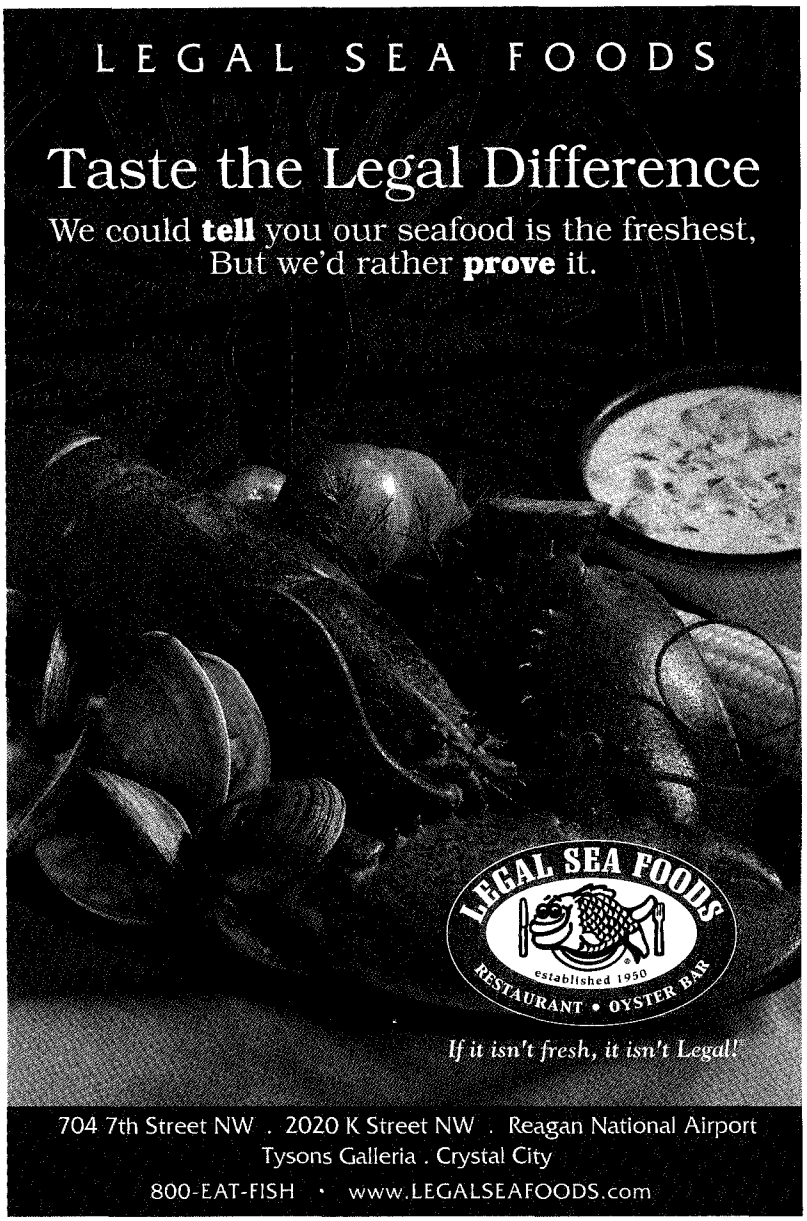
In the "political" chapters of *Radical Middle*, Satin does encourage his readers to get involved in grassroots efforts to change civic and political life. And there's a lot of talk about the new perspectives that new upscale "wired" professionals can bring to political discourse, an observation that was common in New Democrat circles during the 1990s.

But even though Satin continually inveighs against the kind of "impractical idealism" that (by his own admission) much of his own career exemplifies, his book ultimately places him in the sturdy tradition of "idealistic" American reformers who think smart and principled people unencumbered by political constraints can change everything. For all the stylistic differences, *Radical Middle* echoes the message of Ross Perot's 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, which placed unlimited cash at the disposal of the proposition that a (nominally) uncorrupt and nonpartisan candidate could simply "open up the hood" of American government and fix things.

In truth, politics and policy both matter, and good politics and good policy cannot be divorced or pursued independently of one another. Yes, the job of getting political parties to embrace new ideas and reach out to new voters is tough, as the back-and-forth experience we at the Democratic Leadership Council have had with Democrats over the last two decades has shown. And certainly, at some point, if both parties continue to ignore the "moderate majority" and the realities of the Information Age, some new force will emerge.

But to repeat an old Southern saying, "You can't take the politics out of politics." Mark Satin's *Radical Middle* tries to do just that, even as its author calls for a "new politics" based on advocating "third way" policies as though nobody has thought of them before. I invite him to join those of us engaged in the epic battle between moderation and ideological extremism—even if he won't join a political party.

Ed Kilgore, is policy director of the Democratic Leadership Council.



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